

Service Date—December 20, 2020

Sermon Text—Luke 1:76-79

This is the fourth Sunday of Advent. All the candles are lit. It's crunch time when it comes to Christmas. Are you ready? Have you forgotten anything? You have if you followed something called *The Ultimate Christmas Countdown Checklist* that I happened across recently. It was published in a popular lifestyle magazine to help readers prepare for Christmas and not forget anything. It was very complete. It had some good ideas. I looked through it. It broke things down into how much before Christmas you need to start and what you need to do first. First was make a plan. Are you heading somewhere or hosting? Once you know that get your plane tickets if you need them. Get a planning calendar. Start baking things you can freeze. Make a gift list. Make a budget. Start shopping. Wrap gifts as you get them. Buy a tree. Decorate. Figure out the menu. Deep clean the house. Buy batteries. Set the table. Start cooking. Finish wrapping gifts and cooking. Sit back and relax with family. Obviously was created pre-Covid. Great ideas. Good to be organized. But did you notice anything missing? After all, it was supposed to be *The Ultimate Christmas Countdown Checklist*. You might have expected that there would be something in there about check times for Christmas services or plan some time to think about what Christmas is really all about. But no. Nothing like that. And now you know why we have the season of Advent in our church year—it reminds us to prepare for what Christmas is all about—namely, our salvation. You aren't ready for Christmas till you're ready to celebrate salvation. And you are ready to celebrate your salvation when you know the nature of it, see the source of it and bask in the blessings of it.

I. Celebrate Your Salvation, knowing of the nature of it

The words before us actually form stanza two of a song of praise called the Benedictus. It was spoken by a priest named Zechariah on the occasion of the birth of his son. A little background. Zechariah was serving in the temple on one occasion when an angel of God appeared to tell him that he and his wife were going to have a son. That son would go before the Lord to prepare the way for him. Zechariah and his wife were old and had not had any children to this point. Zechariah asked how he could be sure that this wonderful was really going to happen. He wanted a sign so the angel told him that he would be unable to speak until the child was born. When the child was born, the family gathered for the boy's circumcision and naming. Zechariah wrote on a tablet: "His name is John." At that his lips were opened so he could speak and the first thing out of his mouth was a song of praise. Stanza one begins with those familiar words: "Praise be to the God of Israel for he has come and has redeemed his people." Stanza one is a song of praise to God for remembering his people and keeping his promise to send a Savior. In stanza two the elderly priest looks to his child and prophesies of his mission and ministry. He says: "And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, because you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways." That's a familiar cry in Advent. We heard about it last week. John was the voice calling, "Prepare the way for the Lord."

What today's reading adds, is that John would prepare God's people to celebrate their salvation by explaining the nature of the salvation God was bringing them through the coming Savior. There was some confusion about that in the time of Jesus' coming. Remember that Jesus was born in Bethlehem at a time when the land of Judea was ruled by Roman governors—like Pontius Pilate and Idumean kings like the Herod family. If you had mentioned salvation, deliverance, rescue, to many

of the people living in Judea around John's time and asked them what it meant. A good number of them would have said it means getting rid of the Roman occupying force and restoring kings from the line of David to the throne of Israel. Many had a very earthly view of salvation. Maybe you remember the miracle Jesus performed of feeding the 5,000. Remember that after everyone had eaten and been satisfied with food they wanted to make Jesus their king. He refused, of course, because he didn't come to establish an earthly kingdom and his mission was not only to satisfy earthly desires. He came to bring a different kind of salvation. He came and talked about sin to everyone he met. He called the pious religious leaders and the publicans and sinners to repent of their sins, and offer them his free forgiveness. But for the most part they didn't want to hear it; they hardened their hearts to the message, hated the messenger and killed him by nailing him to a cross.

You have to wonder, don't you, if there isn't a similar problem nowadays...that people don't really know what salvation is. Talk to people. Listen to them. Hear the talk about the vaccine. Don't get me wrong. It was miraculous that a vaccine could be prepared in such a short time. It will be wonderful thing if the vaccine can hasten the day when life returns to the way we remember it. But that vaccine is not salvation—not the kind Zechariah spoke of and not the kind Jesus came to bring. People will still die even with a vaccine for Covid-19, because there is no vaccine yet for heart disease, dementia, stroke, cancer, or car accidents. For others salvation will be congress getting its act together and providing some support for businesses and people that are struggling financially due to this pandemic. Help for businesses. Stimulus for families. That is salvation. But it's not; as desperately needed as that help is for the nation's economy. Salvation is something greater, more needed by all. Now you know why the Lord sent John and why his mission was to prepare the way for the Lord by giving his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins.

That's what salvation is. It is the forgiveness of sins. Sadly, for many people sin has become sort of a museum piece and an idea that's more a relic of the past than something to think about today. Having denied that there is a Creator who has a code of moral absolutes which he demands that his creatures obey on penalty of death, sin is considered a failure or fault, a sign of the brokenness of our time rather than an offense against God that is punishable with death eternally. And yet the Bible abounds with reminders of God's wrath against sinners—St. Peter and Jude point back to the flood and to Sodom and Gomorrah and the angels who sinned and were sent to hell. And they ask us: Will God treat you any differently? Does he not care about your filthy heart and mind, your dirty and thoughtless words and your mean and selfish behavior? Sin. Paul calls it the sting of death. He means that death wouldn't be so bad if you just ceased to exist when you died. But that doesn't happen. What does happen is that you must pay sin's terrible wages in hell when you die. That is why our world, for all its desire to deny that there is an eternity and a God who punishes sin, is so frantically trying to stave off death with a vaccine. Salvation? Salvation is having the forgiveness of sins. Having your sins removed so that they are no longer counted against you.

But how can that happen? As John would prepare the way for the Lord he would not only inform the people about the nature of salvation, but he would point them to the source of salvation.

II. Prepare To Celebrate Your Salvation, seeing the source of it

Zechariah continues after prophesying that John will inform people of the nature of salvation, and after that he would point them to the source of it. He continues in his song: "Because of God's

tender mercies by which the Rising Sun from on high will visit us.” What is the source of our forgiveness? That we try to get rid of our sins ourselves? How can we be rid of our sins? That we feel bad about them or say we are sorry? We could never get rid of our sins by ourselves nor does feeling bad or saying we are sorry get rid of sins. Isaiah the prophet talks about sin in the first chapter of his prophecy. He says, though your sins are like scarlet and though they are red as crimson. Scarlet was an indelible dye it couldn’t be washed out. Crimson was a bright glaring color that couldn’t be hidden. Such is sin. No matter how we try to hide it and cover it up God sees it—it sticks out like a sore thumb. And no matter how we try to scrub it away its stain remains. How then can we be free and forgiven of our sins? That is what Christmas is all about—that is how our forgiveness came about. God knew we couldn’t get rid of sin by ourselves. But although he is a holy God who does not leave the guilty unpunished but punishes the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him, he is also a God who does not want the sinner to perish. “As surely as I live,” the Lord says through the prophet Ezekiel, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked.” Rather God is a God of compassion and love. Zechariah points to the source of our salvation when he says: “Because of the tender mercy of our God.” As God saw his people doomed to die in Egypt and heard their cry and sent Moses to lead them to freedom, and as God saw his people languishing in exile in Babylon and had compassion on them, so God was moved with compassion—from the depths of his being he saw the human race doomed and determined to do what was necessary to deliver sinners from a well-deserved eternity in hell.

And what that would take Zechariah shows us. God, moved by the compassion in his heart, sent his Son into the world to bring salvation to sinners. That is what Zechariah means when he says: “By which,” that is God’s heart-felt compassion, “the Rising Sun from on high will visit us.” Borrowing Malachi’s image of the coming Savior as a Rising Sun, Zechariah shows us how God could forgive sins. He did it not simply by turning a blind eye to the wickedness he hates or by sweeping it under the rug to get it out of his sight. God would be less than a holy God if he did that. No he sent his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. It was for this reason that God’s eternal Son assumed our human flesh and blood in order to live for us under God’s law and then die for us under God’s wrath and thus redeem us from our sins and guilt.

If you had nothing else to celebrate this Christmas—no family, no friends around, no blessings of health and home, no gifts, no Christmas dinner—would not this be enough to celebrate? That God in his love sent his Son to this earth so that one day he could bring you to his home in heaven. Feeling down this Christmas season—look into the manger that serves as your Savior’s crib, look ahead to the cross he will carry and on which he will die for you, and then look at the Savior risen in glory and the crown he wears as the Conqueror of death, grave and hell. Consider that truth and be astounded. Think no one cares about you this Christmas season? Look at the Risen Sun who has come to visit earth and know how much God cares that he did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. How will he not also along with him give us all things. Be ready to celebrate your salvation—be know the nature of salvation...the forgiveness of sins, see the source of it..the tender mercy of God and the Savior he sent and then be appreciative for the blessings of that salvation.

III. Prepare to celebrate your salvation, appreciative for the blessings of it

So Zechariah has talked about the Savior in terms of a Rising Sun from on high sent to visit us. Now he continues to speak of the blessings of that sunrise. He says Christ comes “to shine on those

living in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.” There really isn’t anything new under the sun is there. 700 years before Jesus was born the prophet Isaiah spoke of the northern regions of Palestine and the coming of the Savior to live there and said: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light, on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” Now at the birth of the forerunner of the Savior the old priest Zechariah says that the Rising Sun will shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. I can’t think of a time when that description of life is more appropriate than right now. Walking in darkness. Living in the shadow of death. The death toll continues to grow here and around the world as a result of the pandemic. It calms down in one place only to flare up in another. Body bags on order. Refrigerated trucks brought in to help the morgues. Ignore it if you choose, but we are living in the shadow of death. And darkness. Monday is the winter solstice. It is the darkest day of the year—the day with the fewest hours of daylight for us in the northern hemisphere. And not only is it dark outside at an ungodly early hour these days. Again and again we hear the experts tell us that we are in for a “long, hard winter,” when it comes to virus related sickness and death. But the gloom of the death toll and darkness is broken for those who know what Christmas is about because the rising Sun from on high has conquered death. He brings what no shot in the arm can—he brings forgiveness of sins, and “where there is forgiveness of sins there is also life and salvation.”

And that means we who might want to sit in gloom and despair in the darkness and shadow of death can get up and walk in the way of peace. Not only has the rising Sun from on high broken the darkness with light and life, but in the radiance of his glory we can see the path of peace. The path of peace begins at the manger bed in Bethlehem and winds its way through all the sinless days Jesus lived as our substitute, and leads to the cross on Calvary where Christ satisfied the demands of God’s justice by enduring death and hell for us, and ends at the empty grave that proclaims Christ’s victory over sin, death, and hell. The path of peace is clear to us now. It is the way of the Savior who said: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives, do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” Just as we now know that salvation is not found in vaccines or economic stimulus, so we know now what peace is. It is knowing that our sins have been forgiven and God for Jesus’ sake and by the washing of the Holy Spirit in baptism sees nothing in us that is worthy of punishment. As St. Paul says in Romans 5: “Therefore since we have been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” That is peace that doesn’t depend on everything being just right on earth—it comes from knowing all is right with God. Such peace is not dependent on all being calm and serene in our lives—it comes from knowing that our times are in the hands of the Savior who loved us and gave himself for us. So let us live in that light and walk in that peace.

Let our lives in this Advent/Christmas season bear witness to the world that Christmas means our salvation has come, we have the forgiveness of sins by the tender mercy of our God by which the rising Sun from on high has visited us to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death and light up the way of peace so we can walk in it. Ready to celebrate Christmas...you are when you are ready to celebrate your salvation—knowing the nature of it, seeing the source of it, believing the blessings of it. Amen.

