

Zechariah's Song
Luke 1:67-80

Friends do you have a favorite Christmas carol, or a perhaps favorite rendition of a particular Christmas carol?

Last year it was Pentatonix's version of "Mary did you know" that was topping the social media charts - and I've seen it shared and posted on Facebook the past couple weeks again.

Or maybe you have a favorite collection of Christmas carols – the Manheim Steamroller or the Tran Siberian Orchestra

Our family used to have a Christmas tradition when we lived in Ontario that involved a collection of Christmas Carols.

Each Christmas we would drive from Toronto up to Ottawa to visit my parents, and we would always listen to "A Very Veggie Christmas" and sing along with Bob and Larry and the rest of the Veggie Tales gang. Aimedee used to love it!

And these days, when Christmas comes around I have another CD that I listen to – given to me by a very thoughtful person a few years ago - the Twisted Sister Christmas Album.

So brothers and sisters, I can't think of any other holiday or celebration which has been the cause for more singing and song writing than Christmas.

If you think about it – we will hear Christmas music played for almost an entire month before the holiday, in the stores, on the radio, on TV.

And there's no shortage of Christmas albums... right? Any singer or band who wants to cash in on a sure money maker just needs to produce a Christmas song or a Christmas Album.

I mean when was the last time George Michael last had a regular Top 40 hit? But every Christmas we get to listen to his song "*Last Christmas I gave you my heart...*"

What other holiday generates this much music and song? I can't think of any...

And as we listen to all this Christmas music, I don't know about you but sometimes I'm struck by the incongruity of those who are singing this Christmas music.

You have singers and musicians whose lives and lifestyles do not indicate in any recognizable manner that they are followers of Jesus Christ, singing words of profound spiritual meaning and deep faith.

"Hail the heaven born prince of peace, Hail the Son of righteousness"

"Christ the Savior is born"

"O Come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!"

And you wonder how can you sing those words and not be impacted by them?

Who knows? Maybe they are in some way and that is also part of the appeal of doing a Christmas album.

So friends Christmas time is a time of music and singing.

And whether you love it or hate it – can you imagine a Christmas without music, without song, without carols? Something very significant would be missing wouldn't it?

I mean we can imagine a Christmas without presents or gifts.

It would be a bit sparse perhaps, but how often do we bemoan the fact that the gift giving and present-getting obscure the celebration of the birth of Christ.

After all when we normally celebrate birthdays, the birthday boy or girl gets the presents, not us...

And those of us who live in northern countries always dream of a white Christmas, with lots of fluffy snow on the ground...

But there was no snow in Bethlehem on the night Jesus was born.

So while it might not be very a picturesque Christmas without snow – a green Christmas can't ruin the **real meaning** of the holiday, can it.

But friends - a Christmas without music, without singing... If that happened then something that is at the very heart of celebrating Jesus birth would be missing.

Because friends, as I said last in week's message the "why" behind the whole Christmas season is that *"God so loved the world, he sent his one and only son!" (John 3:16)*

The Word of God became human and was born Jesus Christ - so that He might come and live among us, become like us, redeem our sinful human nature and offer his life in our place as a sacrifice for our covenant unfaithfulness.

And brothers and sisters in Christ, that is our hope!

And as we confessed earlier on in the service; hope – in the biblical sense – is a noun; a person, place or thing...

And in our drama presentation we could see all of those definitions of hope as a noun presented in the people whom God had raised up who would prepare the way for Jesus Christ, to come into this world, born in the promised land– a specific place... and this results in a song – a thing

Because of the Hope that the birth of John the Baptist embodies - a song bursts forth from Zechariah, he can't contain it, he just has to let it out.

So brothers and sisters, a Christmas without music, without singing would mean a Christmas with no hope - and that is simply just not the case – there is always Hope.

Because the birth of Jesus Christ is the central part of the God's ultimate plan to save this world.

And in celebrating the Hope which came from anticipating the first coming of Jesus Christ, we encourage each other with the Hope that comes from anticipating the second coming of Jesus.

So let's look at Zechariah's song to see what the Holy Spirit is prophesying about Jesus first coming, and what sort of definitive Hope this can give us regarding His second coming.

Now Zechariah's song is a piece of poetry – and like most poetry in the bible it does not concern itself so much with the rhyming of words as it does with the arrangement of ideas and concepts reflected in particular words.

So what we need to realize is that the main point of this song is bracketed by related or parallel ideas. If I were to put it visually it would look like this “((x))”.

Now this visual makes it look fairly easy to identify what the main point is – but it's a bit more subtle than that when you are looking at a piece of biblical poetry.

You need to look for and identify any repetition that occurs in the beginning and the ending of the poem and then work your way back in and that will locate the central point of the poem.

So in this case we start with the beginning phrase in vs. 68 “*he has come to his people*” and we find its repeated parallel at the end of the poem in vs. 78 “*the rising sun will come to us*”

Now in addition to this first bracket helping us to move along toward finding the main point – it also functions as an “expander” to itself.

So in vs. 68 Yahweh the God of Israel comes to his people to redeem them, it's a very short succinct statement which leaves one asking; “what does it mean to redeem?”

The repeated bracket in vs. 78 expands on this and defines redemption as it describes how the rising sun comes to us “*from heaven to shine on those living in darkness, and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the path of peace*”

So what is redemption? It is God revealing himself to those who do not know His light, it is being enabled to see and turn away from death and walk in peace – shalom, wholeness...

Do you see how this works?

So the next repeated bracket comes to us a little farther in, at vs. 69, where it says “a horn of salvation” this is repeated in parallel fashion in vs 77 when it says “the knowledge of salvation.”

Just as King David was tasked to lead the people to be faithful covenant partners with Yahweh, John the Baptist will lead God’s people to return to faithfulness by repenting from their sin in anticipation of the one who King David foreshadowed.

Next, we see that the reference to “holy prophets” in vs 70 is repeated in parallel fashion in vs. 76 – “a prophet of the Most High”

And in the story of God’s people in the nation of Israel prophets were either warning them to repent and return to faithfulness or they would be given over to enemies as a consequence.

And so the next repeated bracket that we come across is the mention of “*salvation from enemies*” in vs. 71 and “*rescue from the hand of our enemies*” in vs. 74.

And then the final bracket narrows things down around the main point with the reference to “*our ancestors*” in vs 72 repeated in parallel in vs. 73 where it mentions “*our father Abraham*”

And this leads us to the central point of this poem, in the second half of vs. 72, which is “*to remember His holy covenant*”

So brothers and sisters, what we hear the Spirit saying through Zechariah is that God’s Holy Covenant is Hope!

And that the first coming of Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of that Hope.

And therefore biblical, covenant Hope has always been something very tangible, real and concrete – and it still is and always will be as we look forward to Jesus second coming...

When the fulfilment of God's Holy Covenant will become the completion of God's Holy Covenant.

And this is an important message to us – brothers and sisters in Christ – we need to be reminded the God remembers His holy Covenant, and that this is a Hope.

Because Israel, prior to the birth of John the Baptist, had experienced an absence of God's covenant favor.

That is why Zechariah's song speaks about God now coming to his people, and the light of God coming to those who are in darkness and the shadow of death.

And these aren't references to God breaking into people's ignorance or willing sinfulness.

This darkness and death are the contradiction which God's chosen people experienced as they lived under oppression.

They were God's covenant people, they had all his promises of blessing and favor – but yet their reality was one of suffering and oppression and the silence and inactivity of the God who had chosen them as His own.

But Zechariah is made aware through the Holy Spirit that this is all about to change – because God will remember His Holy Covenant. HOPE.

And brothers and sisters in Christ, we who have been brought into God's holy Covenant through Jesus Christ, also face a similar contradictory experience of darkness and death.

We have been saved and redeemed – brought into the Holy Covenant by the blood of Jesus Christ.

And the scripture tells us that *“God raised us up with Christ, and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus”* (Eph 2:6)

We have been given the Holy Spirit, who produces the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self control, etc... gives us the gifts of the Spirit to build up the body of Christ... (1 Cor 12)

And we have been given the mind of Christ and made heirs with Him (1 Cor 2:16, Rom 8:17)

All these benefits of the Holy Covenant fulfilled in Jesus Christ, given to us though the Holy Spirit – and yet... as the apostle Paul says *“For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.”* (Rom 7:22-23)

And the contradictory experience goes well beyond our personal internal struggles as well...

We look around us at our world and we still see that people suffer sickness, disease and pain, broken hearts, and relationship breakdown.

There is war, terrorism, corruption, oppression – and it seems to be getting worse, not better.

Our societies and nations are becoming polarized, fragmented and splintered, and lies and misinformation are spread and used to promote one groups agenda at the expense of others.

And in our own city we see an economic downturn with many people out of work and no foreseeable improvement in the near future.

And there is this contradiction between the joy and peace on earth and good will towards all men that Jesus supposedly brought at His birth... where is it?

Now, to be sure in both our own lives and in this world there is work that we can do to make a difference - in co-operation

with the Holy Spirit, as part of being redeemed stewards made in God's image.

But honestly, what each of us can do is simply a drop in the bucket with regards to the world's problems...

Not to mention the fact that no matter how many refugees we are able to help – it ultimately won't eliminate the wars and the armed conflicts which produces refugees.

And no matter how many troops or bombs we drop on terrorists it won't eliminate the lies and false religions which radicalize them...

So – all this is to say that we too experience a contradiction between being part of God's Holy Covenant through Jesus Christ and all that it is supposed to entail for us and the world and the reality that we live and experience.

Which is why we need to hear the main point of Zechariah's song this morning – God remembers His Holy Covenant!

Brothers and sisters this is our concrete HOPE.

It is not wishing or positive thinking, or optimistically speculative analysis, it is a noun.

Just as God remembered his Holy Covenant and brought it to fulfillment in the first coming of Jesus Christ God will remember his Holy Covenant and bring it to completion in the second coming of Jesus Christ!

And Jesus Christ is a person, born in a place, who redeems ALL things! He is the fullness of HOPE.

Not just because He is the Son of God who will return in power to make all things new – but because until that day comes – in His very person, His very existence as the Word of God made flesh, fully human, fully divine - He embodies the completion of the Covenant.

That is why He is our concrete, tangible absolutely real HOPE.

And friends – God remembers His holy Covenant.

So no matter what you see going on in the world around you...
no matter what you experience in your life as covenant
partner with God in Jesus Christ...

The reality of reality is that the way things are supposed to be
it at present securely and solidly fulfilled in the person of our
lord and savior Jesus Christ.

And God will remember His Holy Covenant and bring that
fulfilment in Jesus to completion in your life, my life and
throughout the entire universe.

That is Hope – that is why we sing at Christmas.

Let's pray