

Luke 1:57–80
Advent II midweek (Benedictus)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
December 13, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

This Advent season, as we prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of the Christ child at Christmas, we're focusing on the "canticles of Christmas," the earliest Christmas carols the church has. These hymns come straight from God's Word, from the Gospel according to St. Luke, chapters 1 and 2. Last week we covered the Magnificat, the song of Mary as she magnifies the LORD for the good things He has done for her. This evening, we'll look at the Benedictus, the song of Zechariah, which he sang on the occasion of his son, John the Baptist's circumcision, his entrance into the people of God.

The "Benedictus," like the "Magnificat," is named after the first word of the canticle in Latin. "Benedictus" is related to the word "benediction," the blessing said over God's people at the end of the Divine Service: "The LORD bless you and keep you," etc. "Benedictus" means "blessed." "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel." This one word, "blessed," connects Zechariah's song to the psalms and hymns of God's people in the Old Testament (Ps 144, 1 Chron. 29:10ff).

If you look closely at the Benedictus in your Bible, you'll notice this hymn consists of two stanzas and each stanza is only one sentence. That's 12 verses in the Bible made up of only two long sentences. The first stanza is about the past, about all the things God has done for His people now come to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The second stanza, the second sentence, is about Zechariah's son, John the Baptist, as the final Old Testament prophet who goes before Jesus to prepare the way, to point the people to the coming one.

In stanza 1, Zechariah blesses the LORD for “visiting and redeeming His people.” These two aspects of the life of Christ are summed up in the second article of the apostles’s creed: “I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.” That’s the LORD visiting His people. The incarnation, when God became man in the womb of the Virgin Mary, is the ultimate way God visits us. Before He came by way of angels, or in the burning bush, or in a dark cloud, or in the Temple, or in dreams and visions, or in the voices and writings of the prophets. He visited for a time but then went away. Since the incarnation, God is in the flesh and He remains in the flesh for all eternity. This is a permanent visitation. In Jesus Christ, God is with us always, even unto the end of the age. Then we will see Him as He is, face to face, and we’ll be consciously aware of this permanent visitation.

If you read through the entire first chapter of Luke, you’ll notice that the account of Mary’s song is directly before our Gospel lesson tonight looking at Zechariah’s song. That’s because Mary was visiting Elizabeth and Zechariah at the time. Luke tells us that Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months. And we know from the angel Gabriel’s announcement to Mary that Elizabeth was in the sixth month when the baby Jesus was conceived. Doing the math then, it would not be unreasonable to assume that Mary would have stayed with her relative Elizabeth up to the time of John the Baptist’s birth. Imagine then Zechariah singing his song blessing the LORD God of Israel and looking directly at that very same LORD and God present in the room in His mother’s womb! God was in fact visiting His people right then and there.

The LORD God of Israel has visited and *redeemed* His people. That’s the second part of the second article of the Apostle’s Creed. “I believe . . . that Jesus Christ suffered, died, and was buried, He descended into Hell, the third day He rose again from the dead, He ascended into Heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From thence He will come to judge

the living and the dead.” God visited His people in Jesus Christ in order to redeem them, to buy them back from sin, death, and the devil. He did this not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. The flesh and blood of God carry an eternal weight that tips the scales in your favor, indeed, that break the scales. The death of Jesus covers the sins of the whole world and more, from Adam’s sin to the last sin that will be committed, the blood of Jesus covers all sins. And if there were more it would cover those too. No matter how many or how big the sins are that you’ve committed, the blood of Christ redeems you from that bondage. It has an eternal weight. Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people.

Zechariah continues, singing: “He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from old.” In the Bible, horns are symbolic of power in the same way we view the antlers of a deer or the horns of a steer. Psalm 18:2 uses the same phrase: “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.” In the prophet Zechariah (1:18–21), the nations of the world are called “horns” because of their strength. Daniel sees horns in his visions (Dan 7:8), representing the rulers who opposed the Kingdom of God. This imagery is picked up again in the book of Revelation (ch. 13). Jesus is the horn of salvation arising out of the house of David—David’s son, and yet David’s LORD, both the God and the offspring of David. As the true Davidic King, Jesus is the powerful horn of salvation for the people of God, who kills the lawless one with the breath of His mouth and brings him to nothing by the appearance of His coming. That is, the word and the presence of Jesus destroy all His enemies. All this was prophesied from of old.

Next, Zechariah sings about the covenant God upholds by sending Jesus, the oath that He swore to our father, Abraham, to deliver us from our enemies that we might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days. It was a covenant of blood by which God promised the land to Abraham (Gen 15:17–21). It was a covenant of blood by which the promises were renewed to Moses and the people of Israel (Ex 6:2–9; 12:48–49). This covenant of blood then comes to its fulfillment on the night Jesus was betrayed: “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). The covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with Moses and the people of Israel, is completed when Jesus poured out His blood for you. And to this day, you partake of that covenant when you partake of our Lord’s Body and Blood in the Lord’s Supper. There you are revealed as God’s covenant people, sealed by the blood of the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. This first stanza of Zechariah’s song is all about who Jesus is and what He came to do: to visit and redeem His people.

In the second stanza, Zechariah then addresses his son, John the Baptist: “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High.” John is the last of the Old Testament prophets, who has come in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17). And yet, John is more than a prophet (Luke 7:26). He didn’t just foresee and foretell the coming of Christ; He actually beheld with his own eyes the one promised from the beginning. Abraham and all the patriarchs and prophets rejoiced to see in faith what John the Baptist saw with his very eyes. As a prophet, John would go before the LORD to prepare His way. He would do this like all the prophets before him and all the preachers after him, by preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He would tear down all the barriers we sinners set up to receiving the good news of Jesus Christ.

John the Baptist would give knowledge of salvation to the people of God by pointing them to the forgiveness of sins in Jesus. Jesus is the light of the world, the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. John came as a witness to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. Jesus is the coming one, the light in whom is no darkness at all. Jesus gives light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, who guides our feet into the way of peace between God and man. John the Baptist tells us: "Look, the light is coming, the night is almost over, eternal daylight is fast approaching. Prepare yourselves in repentance that you might receive our Lord Jesus Christ when He comes." In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Magnificat.