

Hope is Dawning

Luke Series #5

Luke 1:57-80

David Sunday

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Let's turn to Luke chapter one. We read about the promise of our Savior in verses 57-80 in God's holy Word:

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.
⁵⁸ And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, ⁶⁰ but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." ⁶¹ And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." ⁶² And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. ⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. ⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. ⁶⁵ And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, ⁶⁶ and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

⁶⁷ And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,

⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people
⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
⁷² to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us
⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,

*whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

*80 And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the
wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.*

Lord, as we hear these great promises of your salvation, we realize afresh how much this dark world needs a Savior. We pray that You would build us up in our faith in You so we might be better equipped to proclaim this Savior to the people who are walking in darkness. May they see a great light and may we rejoice afresh in that light and put off the works of darkness from our lives, for the night is far spent and the day is at hand. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

This past Friday I had this passage open on my desk when midway through the day, I received a text from Kate. “Have you seen the news?” I was in a meeting but Kate wrote back to me, “26 killed in a shooting at an elementary school. Twenty children. Newtown, Connecticut.”

Connecticut. For me, Connecticut is the scene of some of my fondest childhood memories. The only close relatives I had who didn't live in Kenosha lived in Connecticut. So in the years when my Aunt Nancy, Uncle Ray and cousins Tina, Craig and Brian, didn't come to Wisconsin to visit us, we would load up the car and go visit them. Often with my Nana Hazel and Nana Gert (my great-grandmother) went along. It always seemed like the most charming and idyllic of places. The perfectly manicured town green in the center of the little town of New Milford, surrounded by Revolutionary-era relics and architecture, way back from the colonial period. Beautiful hills, lakes and rivers. To me, Connecticut is a place of sentimental serenity. But not to the people of Newtown. Not anymore.

Last night, I looked at a list of victims and it was chilling to read the dates of their birth. The vast majority of them were born in 2005 or 2006. We have sunk into a deeper pit of darkness in our culture when twenty children—just six or seven years old—are shot dead in school. Kindergarten. First grade. I have nothing but the sweetest and most pleasant memories when I was that age. I think of what it was like to bring my own children to elementary school—my little girls with their white-lace gloves and my son looking all dapper—and it's shocking. Sorrow fills my heart for these parents, for our culture, for a world that is crying out in need of a Savior.

Jesus said that Satan is a murderer from the beginning and he hates children because God brought about the salvation of the world through a Child born of a woman. Russell

Moore (Dean at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) wrote yesterday, "Violence against children is also peculiarly satanic because it destroys the very picture of newness of life and dependent trust that characterizes life in the Kingdom of God."

As I watched the scenes of horror in my study on Friday afternoon, it was hard to concentrate on sermon preparation. My cousins, Craig and Brian, both serve as pastors now at Walnut Hill Community Church near Danbury. I found out on Friday evening that my cousin Craig was among the pastors who gathered in the Newtown Fire House to pray with the grieving relatives who were being notified of the deaths of their children and loved ones. My cousin Brian emailed me last night to tell me he was preparing to preach today. Over four hundred of the people from his church are from Newtown—four of their families lost children. He asked that we pray for them to be enabled to bring comfort and hope from God's Word.

Some people might say, "There's no way anyone could celebrate Christmas in the midst of such horrific evil." But the more I thought about our Scripture text for this morning, the more compelling the message of Christmas became to me. We live in a culture that normally doesn't want to talk about evil. We act as if it is an anomaly. That's why when something like this happens, headlines read, "Evil Visits Quiet New England Town." But the truth is, evil doesn't visit like an occasional intruder. Evil is a permanent resident in every town in this fallen world. And even more disturbingly, evil has found its way into each of our hearts.

If the Christmas message we believe in is mere sentimentality, then the massacre in Newtown is a good argument for canceling Christmas. If, as Douglas Wilson writes—we have relegated the entire story to "a vat of sentimental goo," in which "feel-good emotions are the order of the day and those feel-good emotions are detached from any sense of deliverance from sin" —then the Christmas story will seem irrelevant and perhaps even insulting in the face of such horrific evil to a world that has been brought face-to-face with the reality of evil.

But thankfully the Bible does not present Christmas through a sentimental lens. We forget that a king who slaughtered infant children plays a prominent role in the Christmas narrative. We forget that the backdrop of the Christmas story is colored with death, darkness, sin and tyranny. So, writes Wilson, "We celebrate at this time, *not* because we live in a sentimentalist paradise where there has never been any evil but only gently falling snow and the sound of sleigh bells in the distance. We celebrate the birth of the One Who

overthrew the principalities and powers. This is not a holiday that commemorates the essential sweetness and goodness of man. It is a holiday that commemorates the beginning of the story of how it came about that death finally was killed, and how the Warrior Who did this great thing was spared in His infancy." That's the Christmas message.

Zechariah—the father of the forerunner of the Messiah—gives us a Christmas message to preach that is rich with comfort and joy, precisely because it is utterly devoid of mere sentimentality. He had plenty of time to prepare this message too. For nine months, he had been unable to speak but could meditate on God's Word. It was a time of discipline in his life because he did not believe when the angel Gabriel came to him and said, "Your wife, Elizabeth—who has been barren all her life and is now in her old age—is going to bare you a son and he will be the forerunner of the Messiah." Zechariah did not believe when the angel came so God said, "Okay, since you wouldn't believe My word you're not going to be able to speak any of your own words for nine months."

I think Luke 1:62 suggests that not only was he mute but he had been unable to hear as well. It was a time when he could not say anything nor hear anything but only ponder the words and promises and plans of God.

It was a discipline from God, but it was also a blessing. Nine months of enforced meditation—plenty of time to reflect on God's Word. Plenty of time to search his own heart and examine his ways. Plenty of time to repent and strengthen his faith in the redemptive plans and promises of God. For Zechariah, this became a sanctified affliction which all of God's disciplines do when we submit to them. The scars of our sin, when we submit to the disciplining hand of God, become monuments to His grace.

His obedience led to spiritual promotion in his life. John Piper says, "God always turns rebukes into rewards for those who keep faith...God will turn the marks of sin into memorials of grace."

Finally, in the midst of his incredulous relatives and neighbors, who for eight days had likely been calling his baby, "Zech Jr.," Zechariah demonstrates true faith in God's Word by writing on a tablet: "His name is John." At that very moment he is finally able to speak. After demonstrating his faith in the Word of God through obedience to God, his mouth is opened. His tongue is loosed and the first words out of his mouth are "Praise the Lord!" Fitting words.

As a result, the whole town and hill country are abuzz with the news. There's a fresh sense of fear and awe as God's presence fills the land. God is on the move. Something

remarkable is taking place in the birth of this child. Hope is dawning. The people are wondering, "What then will this child be?" God's hand is on him (verse 66) as they're wondering but Zechariah is worshipping.

The content of his worship is contained in this Christmas carol that has been called the *Benedictus* in Latin because the first words out of his mouth were words of blessing to the Lord God of Israel for rescuing His people. As Zechariah speaks these words of blessing to the Lord for coming and rescuing His people, we see a message, a truth, and a reality that gives us a message to proclaim to this darkened world. You see, people know intuitively we need to be rescued. That's why we played with rescue heroes as kids. That's why stories like The Lord of Rings captivate us into our adulthood.

We know we need to be rescued but we resist applying it personally to our own hearts and lives. We turn it into a myth or a fable—we don't want to personalize it. But Zechariah won't let us do that.

Let's look at three aspects of his message:

- In verses 68-69, Zechariah praises God the Rescuer
- In verses 70-75, he surveys God's Rescue Plan
- Then in 76-79, he personalizes why each of us needs God's Rescue Operation and salvation

As we look at Zechariah's song, let's do so with fresh eyes, asking God to clarify in our minds and deepen in our hearts this message that our lost and dark world so desperately needs to hear.

Bless God, The Rescuer – Luke 1:68-69

Bless Him! Bless God for three things:

- He has visited His people
- He has redeemed His people
- He has raised up a horn of salvation for us

Zechariah is blessing God for being a **personal Savior**—*"He has visited us."* Many people believe in a god somewhere behind this universe—an impersonal power who has brought it into being. But Zechariah believes in a God Who actively and personally cares for His people. Remember, this was written for a man named Theophilus who needed to know for sure that what he had learned about Jesus was true. For Theophilus this would have

been a revolutionary concept—a God Who visits His people. Not a cold, passionless, detached deity of the philosophers; but a God Who loves and cares and Who has come down to dwell among His people and set them free.

We have a **generous Savior**—He has not only visited us but He has redeemed us. He has paid the ransom price to set us free from sin and death and hell; from our greatest enemies. And He has done this at great cost to Himself through the precious blood of His Own Son, the Lamb of God. He has redeemed His people.

Thirdly, Zechariah blesses God for being a **mighty Savior**—*“He has raised up a horn of salvation for us.”* Jesus is the “horn of salvation” —this is an Old Testament concept that I frankly did not understand until about a week ago. When you see ancient art portraying the four Gospels, invariably the image used to portray the Gospel of Luke is that of an ox because it was one of the strongest creatures known in that day. The strength of an ox is focused in its horn. When you see an ox kicking its legs back and rearing its head and pointing its head at you, you better hope there’s a quick way of escape because all the power of that ox is focused in the horns. Think of a bull fight—the two bulls locking horns and going after one another.

Jesus is the “horn of salvation” which means that all the power of God is focused on Jesus Christ. The Baby in the manger is the “horn of salvation.” All of God's strength and ability to bring salvation to a lost and broken world, to redeem us from our sin and slavery to sin and Satan, is being concentrated potently in the Person of Jesus Christ. He is a mighty Savior. That’s why we sing...

We are the broken, You are the healer
Jesus, Redeemer, Mighty to save
You are the love song we'll sing forever
Bowing before You, blessing Your name

(Be Unto Your Name by Robin Mark)

So we bless God, the Rescuer. We thank Him for being a personal Savior, a generous Savior and a mighty Savior.

Behold God's Rescue Plan – Luke 1:70-75

Then we come to the second main movement in Zechariah's song and here we're called to behold God's rescue plan. In these verses, Zechariah focuses on three things:

What we're saved from in verse 71: "...*from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us*" This is repeated again in verse 74: "...*that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear...*" Here the enemies are not just people who get on your nerves or people who don't like you. The enemies are those who set themselves in opposition to God. Jesus came to set us free **from** the hand of all our hateful enemies. One of my favorite verses about the incarnation is 1 John 3:8: "*The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.*" That's a Christmas message our world needs to hear today. He came to destroy the devil's work. Praise Him for that!

Secondly, what we're saved through? Look at Zechariah's words in verse 72: "...*to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant...*" He recalls promises that were made to David in verse 69, that he would have one of his descendants seated on his throne forever. And then in verse 73, he recalls the oath that was made 2,000 years earlier, "...*the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear...*" What are we saved **through**? We're saved through the steadfast love and covenant mercy of our faithful God.

One of the favorite phrases that God uses to describe Himself throughout the Old Testament is "steadfast love." Faithful mercies. Because God is faithful to all His promises, Zechariah is now praising Him for bringing the Savior into the world through His faithfulness. Not one word that God has spoken has been forgotten. We sing...

Forgetting all our sins
You remember all Your promises

(More than Amazing by Lincoln Brewster)

So we're saved through His steadfast love, His covenant mercy and His faithfulness to His Holy Word.

Thirdly, what are we saved for? This is beautiful to see. We're not just saved so we can bask in the enjoyment of knowing our sins are forgiven. We're not just saved so we can

know we won't go to hell when we die. We're saved so we can live a new kind of life in this dark and fallen world. We're saved to live as if Jesus was born yesterday, died and rose today, and is coming again tomorrow.

I love how Zechariah puts it in verses 74-75. When I read through the Gospel of Luke devotionally, this is one of the passages that seems to always leap off the page to me. Here's why we're saved...

*...that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*

That is a beautiful statement of the goal of God's saving mercies. Just like He brought His people out of Egypt so they might worship and serve Him in the Promised Land, He has brought us out of captivity to sin and Satan so that in this fallen world we can worship and serve Him without fear. That's a new concept for Zechariah the priest. Do you think when he went into that temple to offer incense nine months earlier that he wasn't trembling with fear when He entered into God's holy presence? It was a fearful thing to go into the holy presence of God but now that a perfect sacrifice has been offered for our sins once for all, we can enter boldly and come before His throne of grace to receive mercy and help in our time of needs.

We can serve Him without fear and He changes us. We become holy, like Him, reflecting His character. We become righteous, doing the kinds of works He did in this fallen world and that is to characterize the rest of our lives. All our days we are to walk in holiness and righteousness before God and our lives are to be a blessing to our fellow man in this fallen world. That's what we're saved for.

So this is God's rescue plan. We're saved **from** the hand of all our enemies. We're saved **through** the steadfast love and covenant mercy of our faithful God. We're saved **for** the reason to serve Him without fear in holiness and righteousness all the days of our lives. Praise God for this plan! It's a plan this world needs to hear.

Believe You Need God to Rescue You – Luke 1:76-79

In the last main movement of this song, God gets very personal. He says to each one of us, “Believe! Believe that you need God to rescue you. Take this personally.”

In verse 76, Zechariah turns to speak directly to his infant son—John the Baptist. The first words of a father to his newborn son focus on the mission to which God has called him. Zechariah says, *“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways...”* In other words, “This is your role, John. You’re preparing people for the coming of Christ into their lives.” Then Zechariah starts focusing very quickly again on God and the Messiah, the One Whom John was born to proclaim. It’s interesting that only 18% of Zechariah's prophecy is directed to his newborn son. The other 82% is about God and Jesus Christ. With the mission of John the Baptist—the rescue operation—God's plan of salvation gets personal.

The curtain is about to drop on Act One of the Drama of Redemption. The Redeemer is about to take center stage and John’s role is to prepare the way for Him and for His coming into people’s lives. As we read about the role that John will have, we see what it looks like for Christ to come into our lives as well. As we look at these statements in verses in 77-79, I want you to think about personally receiving God’s salvation and what that looks like for you. This is how you prepare for Christ's entrance into your life.

First word of response is to **hear the gospel** as it is proclaimed to you. God says to John through Zechariah, “You’re going to be called the prophet. You’re going to prepare the way.” When God wants to save you, He will send someone to preach the gospel to you and that proclamation is intended to prepare the way for the coming of Christ into your life. So hear the gospel as it is proclaimed.

Secondly, **know the salvation** He has provided for you. This is what John was supposed to proclaim. Verse 77: *“...to give knowledge of salvation to his people...”* That’s an intimate, personal knowledge. The salvation that God has provided is not the salvation that many people are looking for—financial security, peace, prosperity, power and political liberation. That’s not the essence of salvation that God has provided.

Thirdly, **recognize the forgiveness of sins** that must be applied to your life. Look at verse 77: *“...to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins...”*

The heart of the problem is the problem of the human heart. Our hearts need to be cleansed. Our sins need to be forgiven. The wrath of God that is on us due to our sin needs to be removed.

Someone has wisely said, "There can be no social transformation without spiritual regeneration." Our sins need to be dealt with. This is at the heart of your problem and mine. The truth of the matter is we each have more in common with Adam Lanza than we realize. He's not just a freak. He wasn't just thrown out of some freak show and into our world on Friday. His problem is our problem—sin dwells in him and sin dwells in us. Without the forgiveness of our sins and without the salvation that comes from God, there's nothing that would keep us from doing similar acts of evil. We all need the forgiveness of sins.

It is because of our sin that we are afraid of God and live in the gloom of darkness. It's because of our sin that death casts its shadow over our lives and we dread it. We might think we can avoid that shadow of death for some time but around the age of 30 it starts popping up its ugly head. The older we get and the more we see of life in this world, the more the shadow of death hangs over us. The distress of this world oppresses us because we are sinners and know we deserve God's judgment.

God's rescue begins when you acknowledge that your rejection of Him is the heart of your problem and you confess and renounce your sin. That's the main thing that needs to be dealt with—you need forgiveness. I need forgiveness. That's how Jesus comes into our lives. He comes offering a salvation that is centered on this gift—the forgiveness of sins. I ask, have you received that forgiveness? If you say you have, how do you know for sure? Is your knowledge of salvation grounded in the fact that you know Jesus died on the cross to atone for your sins and you are trusting in Him alone?

With the knowledge of salvation and the forgiveness of sins comes a fourth word of response: **Trust the tender mercies of God.** His mercies fill His heart toward you. I love the phrase in verse 78. Why is there forgiveness of sins? Why does God bring salvation to His people? *"...because of the tender mercy of our God..."* His loyal, faithful, gracious love acting on behalf of His people. It's an intense love.

The word that's used there is not just the word for mercy—*elee os*. It's also another word that's brought together with it—the word *splanchna* which speaks of the inner bowels of a person. This is why the King James Version speaks of the "Bowels of God's mercy." It's

a very graphic way of saying that when God looks upon a people who are in the darkness of sin, His innermost being is moved. His heart is writhing with compassion for us in our agony.

Trust that God's heart is filled with tender mercies toward you and that He will forgive you. He will save you if you look to His Son, Jesus Christ. And as you put your trust in that God of tender mercies, what you're going to see is the light of salvation dawning upon your life.

This brings us to the next word of response which is to **walk in the light He shines upon you**. Look at verses 78-79: *"...because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

Last year, when Mike and I were in Jordan, we went to the ancient ruins of Petra in the southern part of that country. It is one of the most remote places I've ever seen in my life and it was fascinating to see. We visited this place set up as a Bedouin campsite. They had people cook for us; they had running water and bathrooms and everything else. But it was out in the middle of nowhere. It was so dark outside. Then in the middle of the night, we heard animals howling all night long. Their shrieks and wales were bouncing off those mountains. It was the most eerie sound. The last thing in the world I wanted to do was get out of my tent and go into that darkness.

What Zechariah is picturing here is the situation of all our lives before salvation. Philip Ryken (President of Wheaton College) says, "We are sitting in the darkness of our sin, waiting for death to devour us." That's the human condition apart from salvation. We hear the vicious animals. We hear the howling. We hear our enemies around us.

Then we put our trust in the tender mercies of our God. We believe in the salvation He has come to provide for us in Jesus Christ. Our sins are forgiven and in the darkness, suddenly we see the bright Morning Starr—the Dayspring from on high, the dawning of the Son. And when that Son starts to come up, all the vicious animals go into their dens and we are saved from all our enemies.

Jesus is the Sunrise of salvation. He is the Light of this dark world. I think Zechariah was meditating on Malachi 4:2-3 when he spoke these words. God says,

"But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts."

When we put our trust in Jesus, hope dawns. Light dawns in our lives. The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn that grows brighter and brighter until the full day. And that's why Jesus says in Matthew 13:43, "*Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.*" And that's why Paul says that right now, it is our responsibility in this world to put off the works of darkness and instead put on holiness and righteousness. Listen to these words in Romans 13:11-14:

"Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on The Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

When we walk in His Light, we will then be prepared to do the last thing this text speaks of...

Lead others to the peace He has given you.

- Hear the gospel as it's proclaimed to you.
- Know the salvation He's provided.
- Recognize the forgiveness that needs to be applied to you.
- Trust His tender mercies that fill His heart toward you.
- Walk in the light He shines upon you.
- And now, lead others to the peace He has given you.

When Jesus brings us out of darkness and out from under the shadow of death, what He starts to do is what our world desperately needs—Jesus will "*guide our feet into the way of peace.*" Only Jesus can do this.

Doug Wilson said,

"If you want a society which refuses to name the name of Jesus, yet is somehow free from these sorts of outrages (like we saw in Connecticut on Friday), you want something that this sinful world cannot ever provide. We can have no salvation without a Savior. God sent a Savior to us; we have no saviors of our own, just a lot of pretenders."

Only Jesus can guide our feet into the way of peace. Zechariah was bursting to make this message known. For nine months he was preparing to speak these words and when they came out, they came out boldly. They are rich words. The whole scope of our

salvation is contained in this passage. Here we have the message we can proclaim to friends and family members who need to know a Savior this Christmas.

- Are you walking in darkness? Jesus is the Light.
- Is death hanging its shadow over your life? Jesus is the Life.
- Are you full of distress? Jesus is the Prince of Peace Who can guide your feet into the way of peace.

So let us, as God's people,

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
risen with healing in his wings.

(Hark! The Herald Angels Sing by Charles Wesley)

That healing in His wings is for this dark world. Let's look for Him. Let's long for Him and for the dawning of redemption to come with blazing light at His return.

Lord Jesus, we see how empty our words are without Your Word. We see how hopeless our lives are without Your salvation. We see Lord how lost our society is without the knowledge of the forgiveness of sins that comes from the gospel.

We pray, Lord, for those who are ministering most directly to the grieving families in Connecticut. I think of my cousins, Craig and Brian. I think of pastors with whom they work; the people of their congregation and other Bible-believing churches in that area. We pray, Lord, that You would fill them with the comfort and peace that only comes through the Light of Jesus and the salvation that is revealed in Your Word. God we pray that through this horrible evil, salvation would come into many lives.

We do hail You, the Prince of Peace, the Son of Righteousness. Help us walk in Your light this week so we can reflect You to a dark world. And we pray, come Lord Jesus. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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