

Blessed Be

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Ravensworth Baptist Church
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Luke 1:68–79

Well, good morning everyone. It's wonderful to see all of you, and especially to see you from this angle-I've missed you all! Since I spend a lot of time from this angle, it's often when I notice who is here, who's not here, who looks like maybe they've had a rough week, who is bursting with joy with something to share, who put an arm around a friend during the prayer time or talks with the child sitting next to them so their parent can take a breather. It's a physical space for which I am always grateful, aware of what it embodies and what a privilege it is to stand here.

Tomorrow is the 12th anniversary of my ordination to the gospel ministry. When I think back to that faithful group of Christ followers in Waco, Texas at Calvary Baptist Church, I think they believed ahead of time this would happen-that one day I would be called as a pastor to an amazing church, even on the days that I found it hard to believe that I would ever be allowed to live out my calling. It's really enough to take my breath away and fill my heart with deep gratitude and love for each and every one of you.

We are looking at each other again, and yet in a different way for the first time. My friend asked me how the first week as the full-time solo pastor went. I said, "well, it feels like I walked back into my old routine and am living into a new one all at the same time."

She went on to say, "sounds like you all are finding a new normal." That was the best way to say it, I think. We're all finding a new normal because this relationship as church and pastor feels normal and yet, not quite because our life together has shifted. So, we'll find a new normal and we'll continue our life together, sharing love, doing justice, and building community.

This morning we find ourselves on the last Sunday of the church year--Christ the King Sunday. Next week we will be drawn into the newness that is coming with a new church year beginning with Advent. Next week, the church will be decorated with the green, our Advent banner will be up, the worship space will have tinges of blues and purples, the nativity will be out, and we'll light the Advent candles.

But first, before we move to the new normal of our liturgical year, let's pause for just a moment and look back at our worship year. Nancy began this conversation as she spoke of the banners that have adorned the sanctuary all year. Remember back with me to our last year in worship-

- Advent last year was all about Drawing Near to the presence of God during a season of waiting and anticipation,
- Then we got those pesky star words on Epiphany Sunday-mine was humor which has proven helpful this year, and we soon dreamed in the season that followed what Beloved Community might look like-remember the beautiful graphics of all of the overlaid hands on one another?
- Lent arrived quickly, as it always does, well at least it always does for the church staff, and we riffed off Bryan Stevenson's work, Just Mercy as we wondered if God really did see us as more than the worst thing we've ever done. Did we see ourselves that way? And others?

- And after those five weeks of wondering, we celebrated resurrection-the rising we were called to and all of the resurrection moments from the action-packed book of Acts,
- And then, then, remember how I convinced Nancy and Clarence to hang those red strips of fabric from the ceiling as we celebrated Pentecost and the power of Holy Spirit coming among us? They were good sports and we had a meaningful Pentecost Sunday.
- Once we hit the summer months, we welcomed a variety of voices to the pulpit with our Faces of our Faith series-tracking with some of the lesser known or over known characters and told our own stories about who has shaped us and our lives of faith.
- And this fall of course, as we still traversed during ordinary time, we talked of transition and Steve preached on the benediction-the good words of blessing in our life together.
- Our beloved Michael Catlett continued to serve us during the month of November-I read his sermons and I'll just tell you that he got me too in that first sermon! Grief and life, the table as center have brought us to today in our worshipping life this morning.

What a year we've just covered! It's pretty amazing when you look back on what we've talked about, preached about, prayed about, discussed, questioned, and the moments that only we know about in our own hearts as we encountered the Spirit of God in our midst.

Christ the King Sunday is the New Year's Eve of our liturgical year. On this new year's eve, we turn our attention to the song we just sang-the song of Zechariah, which shows up in the first chapter of Luke's gospel.

Zechariah's song becomes even more powerful when we consider he couldn't speak for the nine months before. What a song to sing when you've finally regained your voice!

Nine months before he lost his voice, Zechariah went to work like any other day--he was a priest and one of his days at the temple, he went into the holy of holies to make an offering.

While inside, the angel Gabriel, yes THAT Gabriel showed up. In a type-scene that you Bible scholars will recognize, Zechariah was told that he and his wife, who were both around age 80 would be having a baby and this baby was to be named John. A laugh heard across the centuries, starting with Sarah and finishing with Zechariah was only stifled by his utter disbelief. I guess Gabriel and God expected more from this priest, Zechariah that to doubt so God struck him unable to speak for what turns out to be the entirety of Elizabeth's pregnancy and the first week of his son's life.

Elizabeth and Zechariah welcomed their son to the world as Gabriel said, and named they him John. The town was abuzz with the birth of this baby and the family and friends came around on the 8th day for John's circumcision and the naming ceremony.

Remember: Zechariah still can't speak.

The family gathers and after opening presents and eating some cake, the larger family says-we're going to name him Zechariah, after his father.

As Elizabeth held her newborn baby, she looked at the gathered group and confidently said, "Nope. He will be named John."

The group of priests and relatives looked confused and said, "No one in your family has that name. You can't name him that!"

Because the group could still not believe the account of Elizabeth, the group turned to Zechariah, the man who couldn't SPEAK to try and get some answers. I wonder why it was so difficult to believe what Elizabeth was saying?

Wisely, I think Zechariah learned a few things during his full-term of silence and delivered these words on a tablet: "His name is to be John."

And immediately upon the written proclamation of his son's name, Zechariah's mouth was opened and his silence was no more. Of course, his family didn't know what to think-awe washed over them.

And Zechariah sang a song for the ages. He began:

'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.

This song was all about God's faithfulness. God gave Zechariah a voice to proclaim the faithfulness of God through the centuries and that God was coming again and his son, John would be the one to announce him. "This new savior had been raised up and salvation and forgiveness belonged to the people. This song is not just a song, but a "spirit-event, a moment of God's Holy Spirit breaking into the ordinary, mundane world. And bringing with it God's preferred and promised future." ¹

This version, loosely adapted from the Message, the end of Z's song might sound like this:

"God's heart is all about mercy and,
God's Sunrise will break in upon us,
Shining on those who sit in the shadows,
Those sitting in the closeness to death,
Then showing us the way, one foot at a time,
Down the path of peace."

¹ Rolf Jacobson, Commentary on Luke 1:68-79, *Working Preacher*.

I love the idea of thinking about God's sunrise breaking in upon us. It's easy to appreciate sunrises as our days are getting shorter and shorter. And it's an apt way to think about all that is coming-the days are shorter and may feel shorter for a bit, but God is right there in all of them.

Zechariah must have known that because he had had a LOT of time to think. I bet some days felt heavy, maybe some days felt joy-filled as he pondered in his mind who he knew God to be and this son, who would be called John the Baptist.

Zechariah was a proud daddy singing about his son, John, the prophet of the Most High who would prepare the way for his cousin Jesus.

I know I've told you all this before, but Barbara Brown Taylor when talking about Mary's song says that "Mary is singing ahead of time." I think Zechariah singing ahead of time. Zechariah is singing what the prophets had always sang, including what his wife's cousin Mary had just sung when she reached his home about six months earlier. Maybe her song inspired his.

He almost could have said-even though the Roman Empire is raging around us and some days we don't know which way is up-God's sunrise will break in upon us, God's love will shine upon us, showing us the path of peace. One foot at a time. One step at a time. One day at a time. One week, one month. That path of peace will show up as the sunrise dawns over and over again.

No wonder Zechariah started his song with "Blessed Be the Lord." The sunrise was about to break in and nothing would ever be the same again! Jesus was about to burst on the scene and he knew the world would turn toward the world God had always dreamed it could be-one where the path of peace was a little clearer and where all might know they are loved.

Happy New Year's Eve, friends. Here we go.

May God's sunrise break upon you and may you know just how loved you are.

Thanks be to God. Amen.