

Rev. Gregory Gibbons
Lola Park Lutheran Church
Redford, MI 48239

Luke 1:68-75

LET'S HAVE ONE MORE CHRISTMAS SONG!

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Christmas is a wonderful time of the year. It is the favorite time for many people for good reason. Christ our Savior has been born to us. He is the greatest gift that God could give to a world of lost sinners. Jesus has come into the world to bring us peace, joy, hope, light and life! He has brought us back into God's family by giving us the forgiveness of sins. We had no other way! When we hear this news, we just have to sing.

Singing is synonymous with Christmas, isn't it? There is no other time of the year when you have so many wonderful songs of praise. Many radio stations start Christmas music already on November 1. They don't play that much sacred music, but they do play a lot of familiar carols. We love to sing them at church as well. Our Christmas Eve service usually has about ten carols sung by the congregation and our Christmas Day service has parts of another twelve or so. We sing Christmas songs on the next two Sundays as well, yet I think of songs that we didn't sing this year that I want to sing next year.

Today we will be taking down the Christmas tree and the decorations. I always hate to see that happen. They look so pretty. Liturgically they should be taken down after the festival of the Epiphany of our Lord which takes place this coming Wednesday. I'm guessing that no one will be here on Thursday morning so we will take them down today. There is still time for singing. Throughout history the Church has sung songs associated with the first Christmas and the birth of our Lord. A couple of weeks ago we had the song of Mary, the Magnificat. We think of the song of the angels: Glory to God in the highest! Today we will look at the song of Zechariah, what is known as the Benedictus. LET'S HAVE ONE MORE CHRISTMAS SONG!

The words of our text are not as familiar to us as they once were. They were used in the Matins service of the 1941 Hymnal. You have to find them in the new hymnal. I honestly don't think that I have used them for a long time. We'll have to do something about that. They were originally sung by an old priest named Zechariah eight days after the miraculous birth of his son, John the Baptist.

Every day, at the morning and evening sacrifices, the great altar located outside the front doors of the temple was prepared for the sacrifice of a lamb. A priest would be chosen to go into the temple to burn incense. When the priest was finished, he would come out and give a benediction or blessing to the people. The choir would sing a Psalm, the offering on the altar would be burned, the trumpets would sound and the people would fall down and worship.

Yet on this day something went wrong. Zechariah the priest didn't come out of the temple. The people waited and waited. They started to feel very uneasy. When he did come out of the temple, he didn't give the benediction. He didn't say anything. Imagine if we had a service where after confessing our sins, I didn't say anything. There would be no absolution. I think that we take it for granted that a pastor must have a tongue and mouth that work.

St. Luke explains what happened. The angel Gabriel came to Zechariah in the temple and told him that even though he and his wife were long past the years of childbearing, they would have a son who would prepare the hearts of the people for the coming of the Messiah. But because Zechariah and his wife were very old, he did not believe such a thing was possible. The angel would then announce: "Now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this

happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at the proper time.” You cannot have a prophet, priest or pastor who does not believe what he has been given to proclaim. You had a priest who could not speak, but would nevertheless become the father of a prophet.

Now here we are nine months later. His son has been born and now circumcised. What was the child’s name? Zechariah asks for a writing tablet and writes: “His name is John!” Immediately he is now able to speak. What would he say after nine months of silence? “Wow! It’s great to be able to talk again?” No, he picks up right where he left off. He gives a blessing of thanksgiving to the LORD God for the salvation of his people. God was going to fulfill the covenant promise he made with his people. This was a very special song. It was a blessing, a sermon, a thanksgiving and a hymn all rolled into one. It was worth waiting nine months because we still have it over 2000 years later. “Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, ‘Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.’”

Zechariah’s song embraces both the Old Testament and the New. He will describe God’s mighty saving acts in the past and how John and Jesus will bring those mighty acts to fulfillment. He refers to God as the LORD, the God of free and faithful grace, who demonstrated his love to an unfaithful people. That word comes from the Hebrew word meaning “to be.” God is the great I AM. He is not “I was”, a has-been. He is not “I will be” hoping to evolve in the future. He always was and is and will be. He is the eternal God who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin.

Our Old Testament lesson shows God’s dealings with another very old man and his wife. It is surprising that when the angel first visited Zechariah that Zechariah didn’t immediately think of the story of Abram or Abraham as he would now be known. Abram was seventy–five years old when God first came to him and told him that he would have a son. Now 24 years had passed and no son was there. But God does not forget his promises. He is going to repeat the promises he had previously made, a cluster of promises.

Abraham would not merely be the father of one son; he would become the father of many nations. Many people would come from his seed, kings like David and Solomon. Even more so would be the one who would be King of kings and Lord of lords, the Savior of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ. This was all prophesied by people like Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah and many others.

As you listen to Zechariah, you will note that he speaks of the coming of our Lord as a past event. “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.” It was six months until Jesus’ birth, but his very coming is the assurance that God has come and has redeemed his people. When God makes a promise, he means it. Zechariah was now speaking from experience.

Jesus would redeem his people. He would buy us back from our slavery to sin, death and the power of Satan. We hear a lot about our country’s national debt which has now gone to \$18 trillion. Could that ever be paid off? Who could accomplish such a feat? Think of the debt of our sins, billions of people since the dawn of time, living in every possible culture. Think of all the atrocities committed over those thousands of years, all the hurtful and hateful words and deeds. Think of your life and all the things that you have said and done and yes, thought. Think of all the good things, acts of love that you have failed to do because you don’t want to. Your selfishness is too great. These sins condemn us. We cannot pay for them.

But God could and God did! Zechariah speaks of the accomplished fact. God has redeemed his people. That child who came into the world and was placed in the manger would grow up and give his life to pay our debt. He redeemed us not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.

Jesus is a horn of salvation for us. That combines Jesus’ gracious work of salvation with a picture of power. Jesus would offer up his life for the sin of the world. He did that because no one could take his life from him. He had

the authority to lay it down and the authority to take it up again. He allowed his enemies to beat him and condemn him and spit on him and nail him to the cross. But he is fully God and he will return. When he returns he will come in all his power and glory. We've certainly talked about that over the last few months. He came the first time to save, but he will come the second time to judge the world.

Jesus delivers us from all enemies that threaten our bodies and souls. We then live our lives in thankful obedience to him. We do not serve an angry tyrant, but we serve a God who loved us with a love that we can never comprehend. He enables us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness all our days. Not only did God provide the Savior, but through the Holy Spirit he gives us the faith to believe that Gospel message as well as the power to live God-pleasing lives.

When God speaks, God delivers. Zechariah learned that lesson the hard way. Zechariah's song is also our song, the church's song. We thank our gracious God who has kept his promises. We know what Jesus has done and we know what he will do in the future. Meanwhile we let our God strengthen us through his Word and through our Savior's body and blood. Next Sunday we enter the season of Epiphany. But for now, we have one last song for Christmas. Let's open up our hymnal and sing Hymn 275. AMEN.