

THE BENEDICTUS**LUKE 1:68-79**

The long-running cartoon strip, *Family Circus*, once had the little boy in the family sending a Christmas card to his grandmother. He says confidently, "I know Grandma likes only religious cards, so I'm sending her this one with St. Nick on it!" Perhaps we're a bit like that little boy. How so? We can take great pains to celebrate all the secular parts of Christmas – gift buying, tree decorating, party going, even card sending – but spend far too little time and energy participating and preparing for the spiritual parts of Christmas. And it's the spiritual parts that matter most.

This Advent season we're reflecting on four poems or songs found in the first two chapters of Luke. We're calling them "The Canticles of the Christ Child." They were probably set to music and sung by some of the first Christians as a part of their worship experience. Sometime much later, a Latin title was attached to each poem. Last week we looked at the *Magnificat* – Mary's song. Next week, we'll consider the *Gloria In Excelsis* – what the angels said on the night of Jesus' birth. Then on the Sunday before Christmas Day, I want us to reflect on what's called the *Nunc Dimittis* which is attributed to Simeon. But today, let's consider what's called the *Benedictus* which means "blessed" in Latin. It was attributed to a man named Zechariah.

Look with me again v. 78 (NLT), "Because of God's tender mercy..." I love that phrase. Jesus' coming into this dark, hurting world was the supreme example of God's tender mercy. The Son of God took on a human body and lived right here on Earth as one of us for about 33 years. He experienced fully all of what it meant to be human except He never committed even one sin. Despite being the only person who has ever been morally perfect, He reached out to sinful people with compassion and forgiveness. Even more significantly, He laid down His life for our sins making it possible for you and me to enter into a personal and eternal relationship with His Father.

Zechariah's phrase – "God's tender mercy" – sums it up pretty well. "Mercy" is a great word all by itself. But when you add the adjective "tender" – "tender mercy" – we're given a picture of God there that's very important. The actual word in the Greek language refers to the inner parts of a person – something deeply emotional and heartfelt. God isn't cold, aloof, or remote. He's not some glorified supercomputer. Instead, God is a Person capable of the deepest emotions and most profound tenderness. Zechariah's song – the *Benedictus* – is a celebration of how God has expressed His tender mercy to you, me, and everyone. Here's a truth to dwell on:

GOD'S TENDER MERCY IS EXPRESSED IN HIS FAITHFULNESS.

Who was Zechariah? His story was told earlier in Luke 1 and I'll just summarize it. He was a Jewish priest. While he was taking his turn serving in the Temple, an angel appeared to him. Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, had never been able to have children. The angel informed Zechariah that God was going to do a miracle in and for them. Even though Elizabeth was now too old to get pregnant, God was going to make it possible for her to conceive and have a son. That's exactly what happened much to

Zechariah and Elizabeth's surprise and joy. Their son grew up to become John the Baptist – the prophet who prepared the way for Jesus spiritually speaking through his powerful preaching and baptizing of people. Now Elizabeth was a relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary even came to live with Zechariah and Elizabeth during her pregnancy with Jesus. Elizabeth gave birth first and Zechariah's song – the *Benedictus* – was a kind of response to all those incredible, mysterious, and miraculous things happening to them and to Mary. The Holy Spirit gave Zechariah supernatural insight into the significance of both his son's life and ministry – John the Baptist – and also into the life and ministry of Mary's son, Jesus.

Zechariah understood Jesus was going to be the promised Messiah – the savior of the Jewish people. He acknowledged God was demonstrating His remarkable and absolute faithfulness by sending Jesus into the world. In the song we read, he traced God's faithfulness to the Jewish people. He mentioned David in v. 69, because God had promised him, Israel's greatest king, about a 1000 years earlier that the Messiah would be a descendant from David's family. Zechariah referred to Abraham in v. 73, the father of the Jewish people, because God had promised him about 2000 years earlier that all the nations would be blest through his physical offspring. What was happening in and to Mary was the fulfillment of God's promises. It proved God's faithfulness beyond any shadow of a doubt. It proved God is trustworthy, reliable, and keeps His promises.

The Bible celebrates God's faithfulness. It's one of His greatest character traits. "Understand, therefore, that the LORD your God is indeed God. He is the faithful God who keeps his covenant for a thousand generations and lavishes his unending love on those who love him and obey his commands." (Dt. 7:9 NLT). The psalmist said, "Your unending love, O Lord, is as vast as the heavens; your faithfulness reaches beyond the clouds." (Ps. 36:5 NLT) The Bible also says, "God will do this, for he is faithful to do what he says, and he has invited you into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." (1 Cor. 1:9 NLT) Faithfulness. God keeps His promises. God doesn't forget His people. God does what He says He will do. And here's the greater truth we should find encouraging at all times. If God is faithful in the big things like sending Jesus into the world as He promised to do, He can be trusted to be faithful in the small things that pertain to your life and mine.

What happened to Zechariah and Elizabeth is an example of God's faithfulness on a more personal level. They were unable to have children. In that day and age, children were considered God's supreme blessing. Our culture doesn't always view children the same way. It can see children as an inconvenience or even a liability witnessed by abortion, child abuse, and the fact some kids in our culture suffer neglect. Even though people of that day and time were right to see children as a great blessing from God, they came to an unfortunate conclusion about the absence of kids. They assumed wrongly that infertility was God's punishment or judgment on a couple. A couple without children was thought to have displeased God in some way. I can only imagine Zechariah and Elizabeth had endured painful, humiliating gossip over the years. "Why can't she get pregnant? What did they do to offend God? God must be punishing them for some great sin." But God had a greater purpose behind their heartache. God

turned their deep disgrace into a profound blessing. He turned their misfortune into a miracle. He enabled Elizabeth to conceive at an age when it would have been humanly impossible. In addition, the child she carried was to play a very important role in the ministry of the Savior of the world - his distant cousin, Jesus.

This story ought to make you very glad! God is always faithful to His people. It's true, your life may be full of heartaches and disappointments this Christmas season. Don't let those negatives make you think God is absent or that He's forgotten about you. Tough times – even great heartaches – are no evidence God has abandoned you or is punishing you. The last chapter of God's work in your life hasn't been written yet. Hold on to the precious truth that God is faithful. He has a tender, merciful heart that overflows with compassion towards you. Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, God has a plan and purpose for your life even when you can't understand what He's doing or why He allows difficult things to come your way. In fact, it's when we go through those hard times in life while holding on even tighter to God by faith that God often proves His great faithfulness to us as never before.

This story reveals something else to me. Consider how Zechariah and Elizabeth responded to their disappointment. They must have often wondered why they were childless. Maybe they wondered if God was punishing them for some unknown sin. I imagine they wept and cried out to God. Nevertheless, there's no sign of bitterness towards God despite their heartache. Now, it's true Zechariah had a problem believing God was going to do a miracle. At first, he scoffed at the angel's message of Elizabeth getting pregnant at her age. But is that really so surprising or so terrible? No, I see two people who continued to love and serve the Lord the best way they knew how despite their childlessness. God honored their simple faith and trust in Him regardless. When I think of this couple, this verse comes to mind, "Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise." (Heb. 10:23 NLT)

In the *Benedictus*, Zechariah said, "We have been rescued from our enemies so we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live." (Lk. 1:74-75 NLT) God never wants you to serve Him because you're afraid you're going to "get it" from God if you don't. But God certainly does want you to keep trusting Him despite the presence of things in your life you don't like or understand. God does want you to learn the importance and value of trusting Him day after day, month after month, year after year without getting all sour, angry, and bitter towards Him.

Some years ago a promising young athlete was favored to win the one mile race at a high school track meet. He was expected to set a new record. In the same race was another runner from another school who was a last minute substitute for a teammate who had become ill. The coach said to this sub, "Son, I don't expect you to win. I do expect you to finish." The favored runner from the other school won the mile run easily as expected. The sub came in a distant last. In fact, they delayed the start of the next even so he could cross the finish line. When he finally got there, he was so exhausted he fell over like a tree that had just been cut down. His face was bloody and scratched from hitting the ground. A track official ran over to see if he was alright. He asked the

sub, “Why didn’t you drop out when you saw you were going to lose?” Gasping for air, the young substitute runner said, “Our best runner was sick. Coach told me to run in his place.” “I know,” the track official asked, “but why didn’t you quit?” The sub replied, “Coach didn’t tell me to quit. He told me to finish. That’s what I did.”

Zechariah and Elizabeth didn’t quit, did they? They believed God was faithful despite carrying around for many years this huge ache in their hearts, despite feeling humiliated and disgraced. They just kept on living for God steadily. At the end of the day, their trust in God was vindicated. God blest them in a miraculous way and made them the envy of everyone who knew them. I don’t know what heartache or disappointment you might be facing this Christmas season. I do know God is faithful. He has a heart full of tender mercy. And because He is faithful, He will strengthen you to keep on being faithful to Him. Keep trusting Him. God will have the last word in your life. Here’s a second great truth about His tender mercy.

GOD’S TENDER MERCY IS EXPRESSED IN HIS FORGIVENESS.

The Holy Spirit allowed Zechariah to understand something of the very special role his son, John the Baptist, was to have in regard to Jesus. Zechariah said about his son, John, ““And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins.” (Lk. 1:76-66 NLT) John prepared the way for Jesus by preaching about the need to repent. He helped to create a deep desire in the Jewish people to have their fellowship with God restored. John helped to plant an intense hunger for forgiveness which prepared the way for Jesus and His ministry.

This world didn’t really know what God was like until Jesus came. Many saw Him as an austere, remote, angry Supreme Being. But when Jesus came, He revealed what God is truly like. And the greatest revelation of all was the fact God is love. His heart is filled with what can only be described as “tender mercy” towards us. And yet sometimes we find a God of love too hard to believe in. I’m reminded of a businessman who found out an elderly widow he knew personally was unable to pay her rent. He felt great compassion for her, so he went to some of his friends and asked if they’d contribute something to help pay her rent. They responded generously and he collected the equivalent of two months’ rent. Then, he went to her home to deliver the money. He knew she was inside at the time, but when he knocked he got no answer. He knocked twice, three times, even four times, but the woman wouldn’t come to the door. He left. A couple of days later, he saw the widow he was trying to help downtown. She looked pathetic and destitute. He walked up to her and said, “Ma’am, some friends of mine and I found out about your situation. We want to help. We got enough money together to give you rent money for two months. I came to your home to give it to you earlier this week. I knocked several times, but got no answer.” The woman gasped and put her hand on her face. Then, she said, “Oh, I thought you were the landlord coming to evict me.” The point of the story? Many people think when God knocks on the door of your life, it’s because He wants to judge or punish you. No, God wants to forgive us and shower our

lives with His tender mercies. God is all about forgiveness if we will repent and receive His grace and love.

Zechariah touches on a familiar Bible metaphor in his canticle: darkness and light. He said, “Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.” (Lk. 1:78-79 NLT) In the Bible, darkness symbolizes sin, death, and separation from God. Light is symbolic of forgiveness, life, and fellowship with God. Jesus said of Himself, “I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won’t have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.” (Jo. 8:12 NLT) Every one of us has been touched by the darkness Zechariah and Jesus alluded to in those verses. We live in a sinful, broken world. We’ve been affected by people who’ve sinned against us. And we’ve sinned against God and others as well. What can be done for us – we “who live in darkness and in the shadow of death” – as Zechariah described it here. We can turn our faces toward “the morning light from heaven who is about to break upon us.” That was a reference to Jesus – who He was and what He would accomplish. Jesus – the light of the world.

That’s a great image by the way – “the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us.” (Lk. 1:78 NLT) Light can manifest itself in many ways, right? Zechariah could have said Jesus was like a bolt of lightning – frightening and intimidating in His power. Or, he could have compared Jesus to a candle – safe, warm, but limited. Instead, he said Jesus was like the rising sun at dawn – “the morning light.” Have you ever been outside when the sun is just coming up – perhaps out in the woods or walking along on a beach? It’s amazing to see how the light of the sun touches everything and then just pushes out the darkness and eliminates it with its presence. It’s not a frightening light like lightning, but it’s not a limited light like a candle either.

Jesus is like that. He’s bigger, more awesome, and more wonderful than any of us can possibly imagine. He’s like the morning light – the rising sun at dawn. He comes to us gently, tenderly, but also powerfully and relentlessly. You see, we can do nothing to stop the sun from rising. The morning light will shine. And nothing and no one can stop the coming of Jesus. He’s just as relentless as the rising sun. When He comes into our lives for the first time or again for the 1,000th time, the light of His presence changes everything. Each and every day, we can turn our backs on the darkness and the shadow of death. Instead, we can turn toward the morning light – the rising sun of God’s faithfulness and God’s forgiveness and receive His very tender mercies.

A true story. A little girl was caught shoplifting from a church’s bookstore. Her father decided she should apologize to one of the pastors. The next day, the parents and their 8-year-old daughter trooped solemnly into one of the pastor’s offices and sat down. “Tell me what happened,” he said to the girl gently. She started to sniffle and said, “Well, I saw a book I really wanted, but I didn’t have any money....” Now tears formed in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. The pastor handed her a tissue. “So, I put the book under my coat and took it,” she continued. “I knew it was wrong. I knew I shouldn’t do it, but I did. And I’m sorry. I’ll never do it again. Honest!”

The pastor praised her, "I'm so glad you're willing to admit what you did was wrong and say you're sorry. That's very brave, and it's the right thing to do. But what do you think an appropriate punishment should be?" The girl shrugged. The pastor said, "I understand the book cost five dollars. I think it would be fair if you paid the bookstore five dollars for the book itself, plus three times that amount as punishment for what you did. That would make it a total of \$20. Do you think that would be fair?" She nodded miserably and said, "Yes." She could see the fairness in that. But now there was fear in her eyes. Twenty dollars is a mountain of money for a little kid. Where would she ever come up with that amount of cash?

Then the pastor opened up his desk drawer, removed his checkbook and wrote out a check on his personal account for the full amount: \$20. He tore out the check and held it out to her. Her mouth dropped open in amazement. He said, "I'm going to pay your penalty, so you don't have to. Do you know why I would do that?" Bewildered, she shook her head. "Because I love you. Because I care about you. Because you are valuable to me. And please remember this. That's how Jesus feels about you, too. Except even more." The little girl reached out and accepted his gift. On her face was a look of absolute relief, joy, and wonder. She had been forgiven!

When we look at the Communion Table today, our faces should be full of relief, joy, and wonder. Jesus paid our debt in full. Jesus paid a debt far too big for any of us to ever pay. The Table is all about God's tender mercy. As we come to the Table in this Advent season, let's praise Him for His faithfulness. Let's rejoice in His forgiveness. Let's receive His tender mercy.