

Pastor's Message – 12/3/23
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 Ephesians 1:15-23

I know that many of you look at the bulletin – I see you doing it – before our worship service begins. You might be expecting Christmas carols today or, at least, hymns of Advent, as we begin the season of Advent and preparing for Christmas in 4 weeks. So, you might have lifted your eyebrows and wondered why I've scheduled Amazing Grace as one of our hymns today.

I don't know if you remember, but 11 months ago, we began a focus on this year, 2023, as a year of Amazing Grace! This year, you might remember, is the 250th anniversary of the favorite hymn: Amazing Grace.

God's light of amazing grace shines upon you and upon us all every day and all year! We began the year with a focus on Amazing Grace! and end the year with a focus on Amazing Grace! Throughout the seasons of Advent and Christmas, we will get to hear how that promise of grace shines its brilliant light in the stories of several biblical figures and messengers of God's promise. Each Sunday we will hear from a different biblical figure: Zechariah, Isaiah, Elizabeth, and Mary. In these four weeks of Advent, we will get to hear how their stories of the light of grace bring hope, peace, joy, and love to us today.

The first story, on this first Sunday of Advent, we get to hear about Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. His story shares how God's amazing grace shines the light of hope over the darkness of despair.

Zechariah's name means "the Lord remembers." Once Zechariah was himself filled with the promise of grace, he prophesied the Lord's remembrance of us all. *The Lord has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, he says in Luke 1:72-73, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham.*

When the Lord makes a promise, as the Lord did with Abraham, it will not be broken. Abraham was promised nations of descendants. God greeted him, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abraham himself was fearful and despairing, and he did not see any future for his life. Abraham replied to the Lord, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless. ... You have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." Indeed, he and his wife Sarah were childless. But the Lord was not going to leave Abraham in his spirit of despair. For all of the fear and despair that so darkened Abraham's vision, the Lord brought him outside from his tent of isolation to look up to the stars in the night sky.

There the Lord said, "Look towards heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." And then the Lord added, "So shall your offspring be." There the light of promise was shining down upon Abraham. And Abraham, in his sheer silence, believed the Lord's promise. And like the counting of the stars, his own faith was counted to him "as righteousness" (Genesis 15:1-6). A son, Isaac, would be born to Abraham and Sarah, as a fulfillment of that promise and a testimony to Abraham's faith (See Genesis 21:1-3).

The writer of the Book of Hebrews reminds us of this promising story and covenant of hope: "Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore'" (Hebrews 11:12; Genesis 22:17).

Just as the dark silence of despair was not the end of Abraham's story, neither will it be the end of Zechariah's story. Nor, thankfully, is it the end of ours. There is hope to come. And this light of hope overcomes all the darkness of our despair. Indeed, we count, we matter. And we are counted by our own faith and trust in God's amazing grace—counted among the descendants of Abraham as the descendants of promise! Faith and hope in this promise cast aside all fear and despair. The Lord remembers his promise.

We will want to keep that story of Abraham in mind as we listen to the story of Zechariah. Both were descendants from a priestly family in the line of Aaron and were devout and blameless people. But there was darkness that overshadowed their lives. They, too, were childless like Abraham and Sarah. And also, like Abraham and Sarah when God promised a child, they were quite "old." Luke the evangelist describes it as "getting on in years" (Luke 1:7).

Zechariah was doing his normal activity—serving his appointed round as priest in the temple and offering up incense in prayer for all the people who were praying outside. As the incense ascended, so did the prayers of the people ascend to God.

What were the people praying for? We are not really told. We know that Jesus prayed, frequently, often in times of great stress and trial. In his final hours, he prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” And twice he encouraged his disciples, “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial” (Luke 22:41-46).

What do we pray for as a people? For comfort and strength and redemption in our own times of stress and trial? For the light of hope in the darkness of despair for us and for our world?

What was Zechariah’s prayer? We are not exactly told. But we soon come to know that he was also praying for the light of hope—even praying that God would grant him a child.

As Zechariah is praying at the altar of incense, suddenly he is greeted by an angel of the Lord. Zechariah is terrified and overwhelmed with fear. Such reactions of fear come in the presence of the divine, as we have heard and will hear again this month in the stories of Mary and the shepherds—and may even be warranted! But the angel says, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.

You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:11-17).

But, perhaps understandably, Zechariah questions the angel; he doesn’t believe him. Zechariah’s response to this promise is not one of hope or trust. He asks for a sign.

How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years (Luke 1:18).

How will I know? What sign may I have that this is true? You might think that having a divine messenger is sign enough. Yet Zechariah, like many of us, is filled with doubt in the very face of the promise. Zechariah reveals how much he is still in the dark even when the light of grace shines upon him. He uses the words “old” and “getting on in years” to describe the meaning of his life and the life of his spouse.

Nonetheless, the angel obliges Zechariah with a sign. “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur” (Luke 1:19-20). The sign for Zechariah is that he will be silent, just as Abraham was silent when he lay in the tent of isolation until he came out to look upon the stars.

As Zechariah emerges from the Temple, unable to speak, he uses hand gestures before all who were gathered. These gathered realize that he has seen a vision, but Zechariah is unable to communicate it. At a later time, other people gathered would think that Zechariah was not only unable to speak, but unable to hear. They would use hand gestures to try to communicate with Zechariah. Perhaps the inability to speak and the inability to hear are more connected than we think. Zechariah in this moment could neither speak nor hear the promise.

We should neither pity nor criticize Zechariah for this lack of trust. If anything, we should look in a mirror and see this as a reflection of our own story—our own daily struggle with our own despair, our own failure to hear the promise and our own failure to trust it. How many people in this room or who are worshipping off-site, like Zechariah, think of ourselves as people who are “old” and “getting on in years” without a sense of promise or grace?

Such doubts cloud our minds and hearts from the light of hope even as we are listening to messengers who speak from the pulpit proclaiming the Good News. Our own dark thoughts overwhelm us, and in our silence, we miss the message of grace.

Sometimes I get discouraged and find it difficult to grasp the grace and blessing and hope offered by God in the words of God's messengers. In the silent hours of the night, I wonder if I really have anything helpful to say; and fail to offer a message that is a promising Word of hope that someone may need to hear.

And so, with no good news proclaimed, heard, or trusted, we become silent. It is the sign of our times. And like Zechariah, we just go to the silence of our homes, just as Abraham lay in despair in his tent. If ever there was a time for God's light of grace and hope to shine—where there is so much despair and silence—this is it!

But as I said, this was not the end of Zechariah's story. Zechariah would come to speak again, and even to preach again, as he did when "the day these things occur" would come to pass—when the promise was unfurled in his own heart and spirit (Luke 1:20). And what was it, Zechariah, that the Lord in his remembrance promises us to bolster our hope?

To give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins ... to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death ... to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:77, 79).

As the Lord has promised, a child would be born to Zechariah and Elizabeth. And their child has a part to play in the dawning of the Lord's "newness" of grace that overcomes all the "oldness" of their lives.

But we need to be clear that their child is not the child who will finally bring about that new promise. The new promise is dawning in the birth of Zechariah and Elizabeth's child, but the fullness of that promise comes in the birth of another child, Jesus. When the child of Zechariah and Elizabeth is older, their child will make that truth abundantly clear, pointing to Jesus as the promised Child.

So, all these promises of hope and gracious salvation that Zechariah comes to treasure point ahead to Jesus. Jesus is the One who graces us with the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus is the One who shines with God's gracious light that overcomes our darkness and our death. Jesus is the One who gives us peace with God. Our silent and fearful despair is overcome through Jesus, our Messiah, who graces us with wholeness and life.

Nonetheless, even for Zechariah and Elizabeth, in this early dawning of the new age of promise, there is a challenge of faith when it comes time for the naming of their child. Most difficult of all, that challenge comes from those they least expect—their own family and friends, those whom they love and trust and probably often rely upon for advice and counsel. The naming of the child took place at the time of circumcision, just as it did for Jesus. Think of how also at baptisms the names of our own children are boldly announced, as our own family and friends are gathered with us.

But these dear family and friends of Zechariah and Elizabeth are still in the darkness of the "old" ways. They are not aware of, nor are they trusting, how the "new" promise is now dawning and shining its light. Hence, these friends and relatives suggest that the child be named Zechariah, Jr. after his father.

While we will hear Elizabeth's own story of faith and promise later this month, on the Sunday of Joy!, we should at least note here that she was the first to boldly and faithfully witness to a "new" name for their child—a "new" name that draws its energy and strength and passion from the very "newness" from the One to whom their child will be a forerunner—Jesus, the Child of Promise. That new name is "John"—which means, "The Lord is gracious." But as these relatives persist beyond Elizabeth's objection, it is now for Zechariah to face this time of challenge and confess his faith over all silent despair. And so, grasping a tablet, he boldly writes down four words: *His name is **John** (Luke 1:63).*

The crowd was amazed. But more than that, Zechariah is no longer silent! The light of grace has fully dawned upon him. Now he confesses and witnesses openly the message of promise that was first proclaimed to him. Now he begins to speak freely, praising God. So great was his witness that these others themselves come to witness about this event throughout the land. And Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, would sing and prophesy of the Lord's remembering to bring hope to one and all:

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 (Luke 1:68-72).

Hope always points us to a future. That future was now dawning upon all the people. And John, Zechariah's son, would play an important role in that unfolding, hopeful promise. But John is not the One who redeems, buying the people back from their debt of sin. John is not the mighty Savior from the house of David. John is not even the One who rescues us from all our enemies—from sin, death, and the devil. John's role is defined with humility in the presence of the One who does all these things. And so, when the people ask in their amazement about Zechariah's child, "What then will this child become?" (Luke 1:66). Zechariah answers, even as he speaks to his newborn son:

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways (Luke 1:76).

John is the one who prepares the way of the Lord. John's prophetic voice in the wilderness will be one that calls out to one and to all who are walking in their wilderness of life, their barren lands, that they should repent and turn to the One who is coming after him. This One, the Messiah, will come to remember us in hope in the covenant of grace. So John would point to Jesus, saying, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" The greatest of God's gifts of grace, of God's remembering his promise of hope, is Jesus Christ! And Zechariah sings aloud this coming grace of Christ:

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us (Luke 1:78).

Jesus Christ is the tender mercy of God. Tender mercy means compassion. And this compassion in the very heart, spirit and depth of God comes in the Child who is our Lord. Jesus brings compassion for us all. He dies on a cross to bring that compassion for us all.

And he is raised from the dead so that the song of his undying, tender compassion for us all will never be extinguished. He is the morning star, the light of grace, that dawns from on high upon us. He takes his place with us in this world so that none of us may be trapped in the silent barrenness of despair. We are graced with hope! And what is it that the Lord in his remembrance of his promises will give us, will grace us with, to enlighten despairing hearts and minds with hope? Preach it again, Zechariah: *To give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins ... to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death ... to guide our feet into the way of peace (Luke 1:77, 79).*

Among the many peoples still living in despair are the poor, the homeless, the oppressed, the weak, the injured, the disgraced and the forgotten. Jesus our Lord brought hope to such as these. When Jesus was crucified, a criminal by his side made one last penitent plea: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). And Jesus responded with words of hope: "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Our Lord Jesus remembers all who are ungodly sinners, who in their despair and weakness could never find the strength of righteousness, but receive grace through the merits of Jesus Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection. Through Jesus, we are numbered and counted among all the promised nations— "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore" (Hebrews 11:12).

Now through Jesus Christ, we will no longer be silent. We will boldly confess his name and his promise of hope that enlightens the whole world. Christ has come to save us, to forgive our sins, to shine light over all darkness and death, and to grace us with the peace that we are reconciled with God and with one another!