



Sermon – December 6, 2020
Phillip Bethancourt

Verses Covered This Week

Luke 1:67 - 80

Psalm 75:10

Let me invite you to grab your seats as we take our Bibles, we're going to spend our time back in Luke this morning. Luke chapter 1 beginning in verse 67. If you're a guest with us, whether here in the room or online, welcome home. We're glad you're here and in this season, we're spending time focusing on the Christmas stories through our Advent series. And we're going to see what happens here in the book of Luke beginning in chapter 1 in verse 67 in just a moment. But I want you to know now, before we even enter into the message, that during our response time, we're going to have two unique ways for you to respond. One of those is that we'll be taking the Lord's Supper this morning. We're going to be celebrating this family meal, taking of the broken body and shed blood of Christ. And those will be available here on the tables in the front, and in the middle, and the back. But I also want you to know that on these tables, when you get up during the response time to grab your elements, I also would like for you to grab one of the prayer cards that's on there. And I'm going to explain more about what that looks like in just a little bit. But the whole idea behind this is we want you, for the next 21 days, to commit to pray for someone in your life who needs to experience the peace of Christ; who needs to experience the hope of Christmas. And we're going to write those names down and we're going to commit, as a church, to pray for these people who may not know Christ, that God might reach them during this season. And the reason we're going that is because we come to God's word and we know that it's the only power to change our hearts. And that's what we saw last week when we talked about the hope of Christmas. That the world tells us that our hope is based on possibility. But the gospel tells us that our hope is based on a promise. And what we're going to find this morning is that when we turn our attention to peace, we're going to see that lasting peace only comes through the gospel promise that we find being laid out here in Luke chapter 1. And as we turn our attention to verse 67, you may be looking at this text and saying, "Wait a second. Isn't this Christmas? We should be learning about the birth of Jesus. And yet this is a passage about the birth of John the Baptist." Well, what we're going to find this morning is that Zechariah's message is going to pave the way for what Jesus is going to do for us this Christmas season. And I want you to see it beginning in verse 67 where the text says this.

⁶⁷And 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 ⁶⁹and raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, ⁷⁰as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; ⁷²to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant, ⁷³the oath that He swore to our father Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before Him all of our days.

Now if you had to sum up the year 2020 in one t-shirt, what would you have that shirt say? I came across a friend not long ago who thinks he found the perfect shirt that defines and describes 2020. He said he was out one day and he saw someone else wearing the shirt and he had to pick up one of his own. And this shirt is fashioned like an Amazon review. You know, when you look at a product, you're thinking about buying it, it'll give the number of stars, and then a brief description. And so this shirt says across the top, 2020. And then it gives it a one-star review. And then the description, it says, very bad, do not recommend. That about sums it up, right. We all feel that. This year has not gone the way we expected. There's so much uncertainty, instability, and in the midst of that, what it can do is cultivate an anxiety in our hearts where we begin to be fixated on our problems, the difficulties, that fuel that lack of peace in our life. And we especially feel that now during this third wave of COVID. If numbers stay on track, it may be true that soon in America, we have the same number of people dying every day as passed away on 9/11. Each day. And we feel it closing in around us. So many of us have been affected as family members and friends have been ravaged by this virus. And that is feeding that fear of death that often grips our hearts and fuels that instability and anxiety in our lives. But it's even worse than that because it feels as if when all we look around, every aspect of our life feels unsettled. Your work is out of the ordinary. Your kid's school situation is not typical. Your own marriage and family dynamic maybe on edge. When we look at our own hearts, we can feel that affect. We see it. We know that lack of peace is there and what happens is when that occurs, when that anxiety takes root, our problems begin to define us. That's where we find our identity. That peace is missing. Maybe it shows up when you're waiting that 15 minutes for the rapid results of your COVID test. Maybe it shows up in the fourth quarter of an Aggie football game when it's not as in hand as you'd like it to be. Maybe it appears when you lay your head down on the pillow at night and all of those realities come closing back in on you. We all know what it's like during 2020 to feel that lack of peace.

So where can we find peace this morning? How can we experience that peace in the midst of our problems? Well what the world is going to tell you is that peace comes through the absence of problems. If we can get rid of those issues that cause us problems around us, then we can find lasting peace. And so what the world will tell you to do is you need to decrease those problems, delay those problems, dismiss those problems, diminish those problems, deny those problems. Because it's only when you escape your problems can you find peace. But what we're going to notice this morning as we turn our attention to Luke 1 is that Zechariah is giving us a different picture. That the way that the Bible tells us we find peace is different than the way of the world. And what we're going to notice this morning is that Luke 1 is going to show us is that we find peace, not through the absence of problems, but through the presence of a promise. That our peace doesn't come through a change in our circumstances, but by clinging to a covenant. So

what we're going to notice this morning is that Luke 1 shows us that the peace of Christmas comes through the promise of Christmas. Now let's take a look at how he lays that out.

Beginning in verse 67, the first thing we're going to notice is that the peace of Christmas comes through the promise of victory. So think what's happening here with me for a moment. God has been totally silent to His people for hundreds of years. The last time He has spoken has been through His prophet Malachi. And since then, there has been no word from the Lord. There's been this longing from God's people that He would send a Messiah. And yet, likely by this time, that deep longing had become nothing more than a dull ache. How long, O Lord? And yet, in the midst of that silence, there's a turning point. For the first time there is a new spirit-empowered prophecy coming from God's people to God's people about God's promise. And what you're going to notice as we work our way through Zechariah's prophecy, is all of these threads from the Old Testament are coming together. He's weaving together different realities that God had made known to His people in the past that He is now about to bring to reality in the present. From silence there is now a voice.

Back a little over 50 years ago when Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong were on the face of the moon, a third astronaut was circling the moon in orbit, Michael Collins didn't make the trip down there. He manned the ship while they were up there. And he would orbit around the moon 14 times while they were down there doing their work. Now imagine this with me for a moment. As he went around the sphere of the moon, when he went on the back side, the dark side, the far side of the moon, what would happen? He would lose total contact with the earth. There would be no communication. Can you sense the loneliness, the isolation, the separation you would feel in that circumstance? For some of you, you think, "Man that would be my worst nightmare." For others of you, especially during Christmas, you're thinking, "That sounds pretty good right now." To get away from everybody. But what he knew is that as he came around, there would be a point of reconnection, a restoration of communication. And he could cling to that reality, that promised certainty that was to come that would help sustain him in the midst of the silence. And what Zechariah is doing as he breaks through is he is breaking that silence. He is that voice, a new messenger. But it is still the same message. And that message is one of promised peace that comes through the Messiah.

So who was this man, Zechariah? The text tells us that he's John the Baptist's father. And if you look at verse 67, it tells us he was filled with the Spirit and he began to prophesy. So what does he prophesy? Look at what it says there. He tells us in verse 68 that he says,

["Blessed is the Lord God of Israel,](#)

So why should the Lord be blessed? It's because He brings the promise of peace in several ways. So look at how he unpacks it. He says, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people. God brings the peace of victory by visiting and redeeming His people. As he speaks there, this idea of visiting isn't just when you go to see somebody; it means that you're going to someone for the purpose of help. It's like living next to an elderly neighbor that you've been consistently checking on during COVID to see if they need anything. It's not just, "How you doin'?" It's how can I help? What impact can I make? He says, the Lord has visited us in this way. And he is bringing about this redemption, this rescue of His people. Zechariah is using language from the exodus here. That God is worthy of praise

because He is bringing about a peace that can only come through victory. And the way that he does that, the text shows us during this Christmas seasons, is Jesus comes as Emmanuel. He is God with us. He has visited His people for the purpose of redemption. But notice what goes on next in verse 69. We also see how God brings peace through victory by raising up a horn of salvation for His people. Notice that language. He has raised up the horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David. You look throughout the Scripture and God raises up kings. He raises up prophets. He raises up priests. But now Zechariah is reminding us that one day soon, He will raise up His Messiah and He will be a horn of salvation. This is picking up on Old Testament language that appears repeatedly. But I want you to see on the screen one particular example from Psalm 75:10 that uses this language of the horns when it says this.

¹⁰All the horns of the wicked I will cut off, but the horns of the righteous shall be lifted up.

Now you need to write Scripture reference down. This should be every Aggie's favorite verse. I have cut off the horns of the wicked. I've sawed them off. But what have I done? I have raised up the horn of the righteous. This imagery of horn is one of strength, power, might, victory. God is telling us through His prophet Zechariah that He is going to win the battle. And He's going to do it, as verse 70 points out to us, He's going to bring that peace through victory by fulfilling His promise. That's why it says there that he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets of old. In other words, God is going to do what He has said He is going to do. He is going to keep that promise. But before we move on in the text, I want you to notice when you look at these first few verses, have you observed the reality that all of the verbs that Zechariah uses are in the past tense? Look at it. He visited. He redeemed. He raised up. These are things that he talks as if they have happened in the past. But what we know is the Messiah is not yet here. These things haven't actually occurred. What Zechariah is communicating to us is that when it comes to the Messiah, it's already a done deal. God is going to make these things happen. Zechariah is so certain of what God is going to do that he speaks of it as if it's already happened. Even though it hasn't yet taken place. That kind of assurance, that kind of confidence is the same reality that's true for you and me if we know Jesus. That already He has visited us, He has redeemed us, He has raised up His horn of salvation. He has kept His promises to us. And that promise is rooted in the peace that comes through victory. And this promise of peace, you'll notice as we go on, accomplishes several things. And we'll see them beginning in verse 71 when it tells us that peace comes at Christmas as God saves His people. Do you see how it says it there? That we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. This is what Israel was longing for. Their Messianic promises declared that one day a king would come who would conquer their enemies. And yet, what the gospels are doing, like Zechariah's prophecy here in Luke is it's turning that promise upside down. That God is not just saving us from our military enemies, from those who are oppressing us like the Romans would have been at that time, but that God is saving us from the enemies who hate us most: satan, sin, and death. Those spiritual forces that wage war against our hearts. That promise of peace is bringing about that reality. But notice as he goes on there in verse 72 we see also how peace comes at Christmas as God shows His faithfulness. Do you see His faithfulness on display there? Verse 72 says.

⁷²to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant, ⁷³the oath that He swore to our father Abraham

So think about what Zechariah's doing. He's pulling together all of these Old Testament threads. He picks up on the promise to Abraham. He connects it with the promise to David. He is using language from the exodus and he is fusing it together to show us about God's covenant faithfulness. He is showing the mercy promise. He is remembering the covenant, the oath. He is a God who keeps His promises. You remember the way that played out in the life of Abraham, don't you? In Genesis 22, he'd been called up to the mountaintop to offer a sacrifice to God and he has everything he needs except for what he is supposed to sacrifice. And God tells him that he should sacrifice his one and only son, Isaac. And just as he is ready to plunge the knife into his only son, the Lord stops him. And he declares an oath, a covenant, a promise to him in the aftermath of that saying that He will be faithful in fulfilling the promise that He has given to Abraham. See, what God recognizes in that moment is that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his one and only son to be faithful to God. And in one way that points ahead to what Jesus is now going to do at Christmas. That God responds by sending His one and only Son to make a sacrifice for you and me to show the mercy that has been promised from long ago.

Now what we know in that reality is that so often we want peace without problems. We want the easy road. We want, we want tranquility without trials. We want ease without exertion. But what we find in Scripture is that God often doesn't work that way. That the pathway to peace doesn't keep us from experiencing problems, but carries us through our problems. That the lasting peace that we can only find in Jesus often comes on the other side of our problems. Not before them, but afterwards. And what I'm saying here is that peace is on the other side of our problems. Tranquility is on the other side of our trials. That ease that you long for is on the other side of our exertions. And you might be in one of those seasons right now. You feel that restlessness, pressure all around you. What Zechariah is reminding us of this morning is that God is faithful. He will sustain you. He will equip you and bring you to the point where you can experience peace beyond the trial. And that's why he goes on to say here beginning in verse 74 that the peace that comes at Christmas also is what God uses to empower us to serve Him on mission. So notice the way that he says it there in verse 74.

⁷⁴that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve God without fear,
⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.

The promise of a Messiah is not just one of success where you are saved from your enemies. It's also one of service where you lay down your life for God. Zechariah is transforming the Old Testament understanding and calling the people of God not just to receive the victory, but to perform the victory through the way that they serve others. So how are we to serve? You see it there in verse 75, in holiness and righteousness all of our days. A lifetime of faithfulness to God begins in our hearts with the peace that can only be found at Christmas. It's one of the reasons why right now there are over 500 Operation Christmas Child boxes that were prepared at our church that are being sent to the four corners of the earth to be a light in the midst of darkness to kids that have never known the name of Jesus. And that's why we had volunteers gathered here yesterday to take out the hundreds of Angel Tree gift packets and deliver them to families, some of whom are in some of the most awful circumstances they'd been in their entire life in order to give them a glimpse of Jesus by serving on the mission that Zechariah speaks to right here in Luke chapter 1. And that's one of the reasons in just a moment when we respond, we're going to take these prayer cards. We're going to right people's names down that have never come to

know Christ. And the reason we're doing that is one of the best ways we can serve others around us. It's by lifting them up to the Lord in prayer. That He might open their hearts to experience the promise of peace that comes through victory that Luke speaks of here.

But I want you to notice there's a second half to this prophecy and we're going to see it now beginning in verse 76. If you'll call your attention back to the passage, we're going to see also that the peace of Christmas comes through the promise of mercy. So look at what he says beginning in verse 76.

⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, ⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high ⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” ⁸⁰And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

So notice what happens here. In verse 76, Zechariah shifts his focus from offering a blessing to God to now offering a blessing to his son, John. And as he speaks of him, what he's going to show us is that the significance of John's life can only be understood when it's seen in the light of the significance of what God is doing through the Messiah. And as Zechariah prophesies, he's going to signal several ways that John points to the peace that comes to us through Christmas through this promise of mercy. So notice what happens there in verse 76. Zechariah is speaking about John as a forerunner who prepares the way for peace. He says there that you will go before the Lord in order to prepare His way. Now in this time period, Israel awaited on a Messiah who they expected to be a king with a crown. And instead, what they get is a child in a cradle. And yet what Zechariah is declaring is that there is this one that God is raising up in the spirit of Elijah, his name John the Baptist, who will go before, who will make a way, who will prepare the way for this one that is to come. There won't just be proclamation, but preparation that happens through the life of John. So if you were to come over to our house around dinnertime on a regular basis, we might be finishing getting the meal together and I might have, the boys might be playing all over the house and we need to let them know the meal's ready. So I'll grab the one closest to us and say, "Hey, can you go let your brothers know that dinner's ready?" Now what I'm hoping they're going to do in that moment is go to where each of them is and tell them in a nice, kind way, "Hey, the food's ready." But instead, often what I get instead is them just standing right where I already was and declaring in a loud voice, "Dinner's ready!" So everybody can hear it. There is this proclamation, this declaration that the meal is prepared. But they had nothing to do with the preparation of it. They weren't in there in the kitchen working, most often. They took the step of proclamation, but was disconnected from preparation. When Zechariah speaks here of John, he says there will be both proclamation and preparation. That he will be the one that doesn't just declare the Lord, but will prepares the way for the Lord. He gathers the people of Israel. He conveys a message so that one day they might taste and see that the Lord is good by partaking of the Messiah that he has promised from long ago. You see, what Zechariah is showing John, even at this point, is that the purpose of his life can only be understood in light of how it connects to God's purpose in Christ. And what we need to recognize this morning is that same reality is true for you and for me. Zechariah reorients John's life as it's beginning to be focused on how it connects to and extends the

mission of Jesus. And that should be the passion of each one of our hearts. That God would work through our lives, that we would sense a calling. And whatever the Lord has us doing in a way that reflects and extends the reality that we experience through the peace of Christ that comes through this promise of mercy at Christmas.

And notice what happens. When he goes on in verse 77, we see that Zechariah also tells us that John will announce a message of mercy that brings about this peace. So he says there, speaking about John's mission, he says in verse 77:

*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

So what's the purpose of John's message? You see it right there. To give knowledge of salvation. That's why God sent John to prepare the way for Jesus. And how does that salvation come? Well it tells us right after that that it is in the forgiveness of sins. If you read throughout the book of Luke, this theme of forgiveness is a major focus in what he is saying in his gospel. And what is the basis of that forgiveness? Why is God willing to forgive you and me of our sins? Well notice what he says there. It is on the basis of the tender mercy of God. Literally in the original language it speaks of the bowels of the mercy of God. At its innermost core, this is the essence of who God is. A merciful God, slow to anger, but steadfast in love, quick to forgive for those who turn to Him in seeking that forgiveness. And as he says this, he tells us that that mercy will be in action in the way that a sunrise shall visit us from on high. You know when it's before the dawn and it's completely dark and then all of a sudden, you see that sun pear over the horizon. Light begins to come in the midst of darkness. Well we know that that's what Zechariah's declaring will happen in the Messiah. And it reminds me of a well-known C. S. Lewis quote in which he says: I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else. Zechariah is declaring that one day this Messiah will come as a sunrise, the dayspring, the morning star, and what will happen as a result of that light. That's what verse 79 is showing us. That John is going to declare a message of restoration that comes through peace. That this dayspring that comes will give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death to guide our feet into the way of peace.

One of the effects of COVID has been it's changed people's travel plans; their vacation opportunities. And one of the things that's happened as a result of that, there's been a lot more outdoor adventure that's occurred. More people camping who've never really camped before. More people hiking who've never really hiked before. And there's been a noted increase in the number of people who get injured doing those things outdoors or who get lost. And imagine you're one of those novice hikers in the room. You go out through the day on a trip and while you're gone, you get totally lost. You don't know how to find your way of escape. And while you're out there, you can tell that night is beginning to close in. You have no hope of deliverance before nightfall hits. And you decide the best thing for you to do is hunker down in that time period and just make it until daylight. You try to start a fire. You seek to gather some things to eat or to find some protection. You are constantly on the lookout for danger and dangerous animals around you. And throughout the night, throughout the darkness, throughout the shadow of death that envelopes around you, there's always one thing on your mind. If I can just make it until that light comes. If I can just endure until that sunrise lifts. Then I may find deliverance. Then I might experience salvation from the darkness that I find myself in. And

when Zechariah speaks here of the coming Messiah, that's the way that he portrays what Jesus is doing beginning at Christmas. That we are surrounded by darkness. We feel that shadow of death all around us. We know that our sins have separated us from God, that they brought darkness into this world, that we deserve death. That fear of death enslaves us. And yet in that moment, in our darkest moments, Jesus meets us there. And He meets us with a promise of mercy. He meets us with a promise of deliverance. He meets us with a promise of peace. And that's why this text ends by speaking about what happens to John from here. It tells us that the child grew and became strong in spirit and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. What Luke is showing us is that Jesus prepared the way for John so that John could prepare the way for Jesus. And Luke's gospel is going to unpack for us the reality that while John proclaims the gospel, Jesus will produce salvation. And that while John will announce salvation, Jesus will accomplish salvation. And what we need to recognize during this Christmas season, as we talk about the peace of Christmas, is that Christmas always has the cross in view. That the empty tomb was always designed to lead to the empty womb. And that the light that broke into the darkness of this world, by the power of the Spirit, can break into each one of our hearts when we look to Jesus for salvation. And I wonder this morning, have you experienced that light in the darkness? Have you experienced that deliverance from your spiritual enemies? Have you encountered in a saving way the rescue that's offered at Jesus?

One of the things I've loved during this season is getting the chance to read through our Advent devotional guide together. And if you haven't already connected with that, it's not too late to jump in, either by text or by e-mail. And one of the stories that you're going to come across this week when it's giving us our daily devotionals about peace, is from back in 1914. The Christmas hymn we sang earlier today, Silent Night, was written in the early 1800's. And it made an appearance in 1914 in the most unexpected of places. On Christmas day, 1914, World War I was five months into the battle. Over the course of the next several years, over 15 million lives would be lost in that battle. But not on Christmas day 1914. Soldiers on each side of the war declared a temporary truce. And for that one day, they all came out of the trenches, they interacted with their enemies. They exchanged gifts. They even exchanged prisoners of war. They buried their dead. And the historians tell us that while that took place, there were a number of occasions where they sang Christmas songs together including the one we sang today of Silent Night. If you think about that Christmas day when Jesus was born, in one sense it wasn't a silent night at all, was it? You can imagine the agony of Mary while she's in the throes of labor. You can imagine the rejoicing of the angels of heaven as they are declaring the birth of a Savior. But one thing that we know for sure about that Christmas day is that the peace that it was bringing was not some temporary truce. It was not something that would last for a limited time and then have an expiration date. Instead, what we find is that the peace that comes from Christmas is a lasting peace built on a lasting promise that we are called to cling to in the Christian life. And that's why it's so fitting that as we close our time together, we turn our hearts to these tables this morning, as we celebrate the Lord's Supper together. What we are doing as we take of Christ's broken body and we drink of His blood, is we're remembering that Jesus took on flesh and blood for you and me at Christmas. And I want to invite you to the Lord's table in just a minute. We gather together once a month for this family meal. Not just to hear God's word declared, but to taste God's word through these elements. And I want to invite you to join us. If you know Jesus in a saving way, if you've walked with Him about baptism, this is a family meal for you. And what's going to happen is in just a minute, after I pray, we're going to enter into our response time. And as we stand and sing, I want to invite you to make your way to these tables and to

grab those elements for you and those that you're sitting with. But while you're there, please also grab some of these prayer cards. Because following the Lord's Supper, I'm going to walk you through the process that we're going to fill out these cards together. And in this moment, let's remember all that the Lord has done. I want to call your attention to a passage from 1 Corinthians 11 where Paul gives us instructions on what to do before we take the Lord's Supper. And in verse 27 he says this:

²⁷Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

Let's pray together.

Father, I don't know how many people in here are struggling with a lack of peace, whose hearts so often feel pulled not towards You, but towards the problems that they face in life. And I pray in this moment that You would meet us here, God. That as we prepare our hearts to take the Lord's Supper that we would examine ourselves, that we would confess our sins to You. That we would turn back to Christ, that we would run to You, Lord. And I pray that as we do this, we would flee from evil and walk in holiness and through the steps we take now to partake of this Lord's Supper together, that You would unite us together as a church by the power of Your Spirit so that our hearts might remain fixed on Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.