

IS GOD HERE? Luke 1:57-80

(Zechariah's prophecy over his son John: "God has visited His people")

Disclaimer: Material for this message was adapted in part from sermons found on the Sermon Central website.

Just after we returned home from Israel, Palestinian terrorists blew up two buses signaling a new rise of violence in Jerusalem, while rockets continue to randomly fly out of the Gaza Strip, usually but not always to be shot down by Israel's Iron Dome defense system. Did you realize that since its founding as a nation in 1948, modern Israel has never known a day of real peace? Officially, Israel is still at war with Syria and Lebanon, along with terrorist groups in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. Even to this day, 28 member countries of the United Nations still refuse to recognize Israel as a nation; chief among them being Iran which has made no secret of wanting to bomb Israel out of existence. Wouldn't it be wonderful to live in a world of peace? And yet peace seems so elusive.

The Hebrew word for peace is "**shalom**." All around the world, when Jews say goodbye to one another, they say "shalom;" Peace. The root meaning of the word "shalom" is "**to be whole, safe and sound**." So, the idea behind shalom, behind peace, is to be a whole person who is safe and content and satisfied.

Anything that contributes to this wholeness makes for shalom. The presence of shalom builds relationships that are healthy -- relationships in which people treat each other with respect and all appreciate the blessings of God. Anything that stands in the way of healthy relationships disrupts shalom. The absence of shalom makes for war and turmoil and unhappiness.

People know that peace is a necessity. It is a genuine felt need. We desperately want peace, because it is difficult to live in turmoil. God also wants us to have peace. However, since the coming of Jesus, God's way of giving us peace has taken on a totally new dimension. Because of Jesus, peace is now more than just the absence of war. It is a spiritual contentment that is only found in a whole and healthy relationship with God.

As we move through this Epiphany season -- learning how God has revealed Himself -- know that **God is here; having sent Jesus to us to give us peace**. Jesus is the source of peace. Peace between us and God and peace between each other. If we truly want inward peace, peace among people, and peace among nations, we must find it in Jesus.

Today, as we consider Zechariah's prophetic praise over his son John, remember that even back then, the people of Israel longed for peace. In those days, Romans occupied the land, brutally crushing any movement or person that threatened their control and the local government was run by a puppet king named Herod. So, the Jewish people clung to a promise God had made them in the last book of the Old Testament,

But for you who revere my name,
the sun of righteousness will rise
with healing in its wings...

Malachi 4:2

Then for 400 years God said nothing. The righteous looked around only to see wickedness everywhere. There was corruption in the Roman government. There was corruption in the Temple and among the Jewish religious leaders. Many longed for an end to the darkness and turmoil; they continued looking for hope in an apparently hopeless world.

But after 400 years of silence, once again there was hope. In the days of King Herod, lived a priest named Zechariah. His wife, Elizabeth, was a cousin of Mary (the one soon to be the mother of Jesus). They were an older couple, righteous and God fearing, but childless. Having no child to call their own was heartbreaking enough, but worse still, in their culture childlessness implied being under judgment from God.

Then, on the day when it was Zechariah's turn to serve in the Temple, by lot he earned the honor of bringing incense into the Holy Chamber. There beside the incense alter, he met the angel Gabriel who told him that the time for the Messiah had come and that his own son, whom he was to name "John," would be the Messiah's herald. When Zechariah hesitated to believe that in their old age, God would now give them a son, Gabriel gave him nine months of muteness – and apparently also deafness – to contemplate what God could or could not do.

Finally, after nine months of divinely imposed silence – with the birth of his son -- Zechariah's tongue was loosed and he broke into song.

*you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, **the dawn from on high will break upon us, 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 1:76-79

For the people of Israel and for us, a new day was dawning. Just as Malachi had promised: *the sun of righteousness had risen*. A savior was coming to guide all people out of darkness and death into the way of peace. With his prophetic song Zechariah gives us some insight not only into this promised child of peace, but also into his herald, the boy who would grow up to be known as **John the Baptist**.

Only twelve times in the Biblical record has God personally given a name – or a new name – to a person. Such naming by God,

- Either signaled that this person now lived in a special relationship with God, such as Abram and Jacob – who were renamed Abraham and Israel.

- Or that the nation as a whole had entered into a changed relationship with God; such as the divine naming of Hosea's children, "*Lo-Ruhamah*" and "*Lo-Ammi*," meaning, "No Mercy" and "Not my People." Hosea 1:6-9

But, Did you notice that both Jesus and John were named by God even before their conception; from before birth until the end of their earthly life and certainly thereafter, these two were to live in a close relationship with God. By now, you should know that **Jesus'** God given name literally means the "*Salvation of the Lord*" because that is both who He is and why He came: to save us from our sin. But why was Zechariah's son to be named "**John**," which means "*The Lord is Gracious*"?

The message intended in John's given name - "The Lord is Gracious" – was that God was now entering into a new relationship, a new covenant, with His people. God was, moving us from the age of Law, where people thought their sins had to be covered by a sacrifice, to the age of grace where our sins are now forgiven through faith in God's own ultimate sacrifice.

Zechariah's song of praise was that the long promised Messiah had finally come, that **GOD HAS VISITED HIS PEOPLE**. His praise reaches through the centuries to remind us that God has provided an answer to all the sorrow and all the evil that is in this world today. The answer is found in the reality that **GOD HAS COME!** In the person of Jesus the Messiah: **God is here, now!**

God has raised up a mighty savior for us ...

and you my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him.

Luke 2:69 &76

There are only two parts to Zechariah's Song. The first section addresses what **GOD HAS DONE: *He has raised up a mighty savior for us.*** The second section emphasizes what **GOD WILL DO** through John, ***and you my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him.***"

As you look more deeply into their life and ministries, you can see both John and Jesus demonstrating God's changed relationship with His people – with us all – even before the cross.

For instance, Jerusalem was the capital, the center of the Jewish world. Jerusalem was where the Temple was, the **ONLY PLACE** where one could offer a sacrifice for their sin. Jerusalem was where all the great rabbis lived and taught. But the government in Jerusalem was corrupt, the Temple worship was corrupt, and most of the scribes and

priests serving the Temple were corrupt. **So you see Jesus**, the hereditary King of the Jews, a rabbi who taught with amazing authority, generally avoiding Jerusalem; choosing rather to teach the people out in the wilderness and around the Sea of Galilee.

In a similar way, **you see John**, the son a Temple priest, calling people away from the Temple, away from sacrifice, out into the wilderness to receive *a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"*. Luke 3:13 **No longer was sacrifice required! Instead, one could find peace with God through repentance and faith which brought about their spiritual rebirth, symbolized through the waters of baptism.**

Through both John and Jesus, *God was and is with us; giving us knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of our sins, giving light to us, who formerly sat in the darkness, giving life to us, who lived in the shadow of death, and thereafter guiding our feet in the way of peace; shalom.*

But let's take another look at John's God-given names. The angel Gabriel told Zechariah that his son, *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 1:16-17).

Which was the promise God gave to His righteous followers in the very last words of that very last book of the Old Testament ...

I will send you the prophet Elijah ... He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents.
Malachi 4:5-6

To the skeptical inquisitors sent from Jerusalem, John denied being a reincarnation of Elijah. But Jesus said that he indeed had served that purpose both in spirit and power; calling us to repentance and making ready *a people prepared for the Lord*. Did you know that two or more of John's disciples – at John's insistence – left him to join with Jesus' ministry. Later, many more of John's disciples also became followers of Jesus.

In closing, there is one more interesting note concerning John's name and Zechariah's inability to speak that day when he emerged from Temple. As the priest chosen to bring in the incense – symbolic of the peoples' rising prayers before the Lord – coming out he was also to pronounce the traditional benediction which God had given to Aaron with which to bless the people:

"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace."
Numbers 6:24-26

So when Zechariah came out, the people were waiting for him to pronounce the benediction, but he couldn't speak!

"The Lord be Gracious to you." Just as Jesus' name and life singled him out as the promised Messiah – the Salvation of God – both John's name and ministry signaled the fulfillment of that ancient Benediction. As his father Zechariah sang over him, John introduced us to *the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.* Luke 1:78-79 **God has come! God is here!**
God has indeed been gracious to us!

- Jesus entered our world to bring LIGHT into our darkness
- Jesus came to bring shalom between God and all who come to Him in repentance and faith.
- Jesus' death and resurrection rescued those who trust in Him from the shadow of death.
- Those who follow Jesus are guided in the way of peace; the way of shalom.
- Families who follow Jesus know shalom.
- Communities who follow Jesus live out God's shalom.

What has gone wrong with America, with the world? Why so much violence?

It's because we think that we don't need God!

It's because we think that we can have PEACE without MORALS!

We are a nation, nations, without a moral compass.

We are a people living in darkness.

As bumper sticker says ...