

Fourth Question of Advent:
What then shall this child be/come?
Luke 1:57-79

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December 20, 2020

INTRO:

Each week during Advent we have considered a question from the first chapter of Luke's gospel. First was the question of Zechariah's disbelief: How will I know this is so? Second, was Mary's question of belief: Is there room in my life for God? Next, was the question of Elizabeth: Why am I so blessed?

Today we consider the question of the people: What then shall this child be/come? This question is our question too!

Each of the previous questions is asked in a very intimate setting, in each case, with only one other person/angel present: Zechariah and Gabriel, Mary and Gabriel, Mary and Elizabeth. But now the circle widens considerably!

⁵⁷When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

⁵⁹On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."

⁶¹They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."

⁶²Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. ⁶³He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." ⁶⁴Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things.

⁶⁶Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

⁶⁷His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: ⁶⁸"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago) ⁷¹salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—⁷²to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath he swore to our father Abraham: ⁷⁴to

rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶And 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, ⁷⁷to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven ⁷⁹to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

PRAY

New parents are told that the birth of a child changes everything. Their lives will never be the same. This is certainly true of the birth of John and the birth of Jesus. With the birth of this son to elderly Zechariah and Elizabeth, the entire community rejoices! That is as it should be. That is what we would hope for and expect! The birth of a baby – a boy in particular - to a previously “barren” couple, is a cause for celebration!

While the whole community celebrates, it is likely very small town. You know what small towns can be like. When visiting the Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta, it was informative to watch interviews of Jimmy and his wife Rosalind, when he was president-elect.

In one segment, the reporter asked:

“Mrs. Carter, what will it be like to live in the White House, won’t it be like living in a fishbowl?”

In her gentle Southern accent, Mrs. Carter replied: “Well, I seriously doubt that it will be much different than living in Plains, Georgia where everybody knows everybody’s business!” (Population of Plains: 800!)

Here in this little Judean hill town, where Zechariah and Elizabeth live, everyone wants a part in naming this baby boy! Names carry significance, particularly in biblical times. They convey meaning which can influence how and to what the individual may aspire to later in life. Just ask him: Herbert Hoover Lobdell! Consider Martin Luther King, Jr. named after a great Reformer of the protestant church, MLK Jr had an impact on reforming our nation’s discriminatory laws and practices that deprived blacks of their constitutionally guaranteed rights. Names are important!

Neighbors are applying pressure, lobbying hard to name the boy after his father. Elizabeth declines to name him 'Zechariah, Junior', in favor of the name John. But the gathered community, knowing that John was not a family name, appeals to the father.

Recall that Zechariah, had been mute - unable to speak - for nine months or more, since his unbelieving encounter with Gabriel in the inner sanctum of the Temple. At that time, the angel informed him that he and Elizabeth would become parents.

Nine months. That is a long time to be silent. To listen. To reflect. To ponder. To contemplate the wondrous thing that God was doing, in and through the miraculous birth of this particular baby boy. Gabriel had already named this child "John" which means "God's gracious gift". Hard to argue with that name, or with an angel. Especially after the months of silence imposed as judgement for Zechariah's unbelief.

Now, he IS a believer! Now that all of this has come to pass, that a son has been born, what could be better?

Zechariah confirms in writing: "John is his name."

The gathered community has a mixed reaction - astonishment (v.63), awe (v.65) and wonder (v.66). This event becomes not only the talk of the town but spreads throughout the hill country.

Astonishment, awe, and wonder—all of these are appropriate reactions to the birth of a child. When we hold a newborn, we are reminded what tiny packages they arrive in, so incredibly vulnerable and totally dependent on others to care for their every need. As we hold them close, in awe and astonishment, we often wonder: What will this child become?

Like last week, when words alone were not enough to express the emotion packed moment of realization and encounter between the two pregnant women, Mary sings. Now, in answer to the question of those gathered: Zechariah also sings a song!

(It is called "Benedictus" as that is the first word in the Latin translation.) Besides the content, it is impressive but not obvious in most English translations, is that the

entire song (v. 68-79) is one long sentence in Greek! It also follows a particular poetic pattern or literary form common at the time.

What does Zechariah sing about?? He sings about what these two babies - John, and Jesus, will become! The prophecy in this hymn of Zechariah's, draws heavily on Malachi and Isaiah, summarizing what John and Jesus will do.

It is divided into two parts (v. 68-75, and v. 76-79). The first part speaks to what God will do through Jesus Christ:

God is praised for raising up "a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David" (v.69), that is, for sending Jesus. Hopes long held by God's people, and expressed in OT psalms and prophecies, are soon to be fulfilled. Promises will be kept, the covenant with Abraham remembered, and all enemies be overthrown by the power of God. (p.32-33 F Craddock, Commentary on Luke)

In Christ, God will visit and redeem his people so that they can serve Him. The essential link here is this expression of "hesed" - God's covenant faithfulness and loving - kindness/tender mercies, which will motivate our service. Jesus is "the Fulfiller - the one who will fulfill all OT prophecies and God's promises!

The second section (v. 75-79) speaks to the prophetic role of John, who will become the "Forerunner", who "will give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins" (v.77). John is NOT the one who forgives sin, but the one who announces and points to Jesus as that one. John is Jesus' "advance man" who goes ahead of him, to prepare the people for Jesus' ministry.

The interplay of these roles - John's as 'Forerunner' and "prophet of the Most High, and Jesus' as 'Fulfiller' and "Son of the Most High" signify that the incarnation of Jesus Christ is not a random event but the fulfillment of a purposeful chain of events in the life of Israel, in which John is the next to the last link. Salvation history is being made! (p63, JEdwards, Luke)

Zechariah's song comes full circle. "Because of the visceral/tender mercy of our God, in which the dawn from on high will visit us, to shine on those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace." (v.78-79 AT)

This reference to God's mercy, uses an interesting word in Greek. The adjective describing God's mercy (*splaghna*) refers to the vital organs; heart, lungs and liver. What? In the Greek mindset, these internal organs are the seat of human emotion. We would say: "I have a gut feeling". In other words, the mercy and compassion of God comes from the deepest, inner core of who God is, and this lovingkindness is directed toward you and me.

The question of the people: *"What then shall this child be/come?"* is answered by Zechariah with regard, not only to his own son John, but also in relationship to Jesus himself, who will soon be born.

One well-known Christmas carol raises a similar question with regard to Jesus: *"What child is this?" "What then shall this child be/come?"*

These are significant questions for us today. Each one of us must come to our own answer, by faith. These two infants will grow in relative obscurity until they re-enter the stage of human history as young adults. Both will carry on public ministries, both will die at the hands of the authorities. But we believe that the death of Christ on the cross, is the hinge of history, for Christ's resurrection exalted him to his heavenly throne once again.

What then shall this child become? What child is this? These are our questions, yours, and mine.

Thirty years later Jesus will ask his disciples (in Mark 8): ²⁷Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

²⁸They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

²⁹"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

How you and I answer this question, will change everything.

I would offer three simple steps—A, B, Cs of salvation:

A - accept/acknowledge the fact that you are an imperfect human being, a sinner. ...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". (Romans 3:23) "Repent -

for the kingdom of God is near!" was the message of John. Repent means to turnaround, forsake going your own way, and turn toward God, and Follow Christ.

B - Believe that Christmas can be summed up in John 3:16:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

C - Confess your need for a Savior and Commit your life to Christ.

⁹If you confess/declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. ¹¹As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." Romans 10:9.

⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the **gift** of God - ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

What better gift could one ever receive, at Christmas, or on any occasion, that the gift of forgiveness and new life in Christ?

I promise, if you follow these ABC's, if you follow Jesus, your life will never be the same!

PRAY.