

“God’s Salvation”

As we approach the year 2020, we live in the United States of America, considered by many to be the greatest nation which has ever existed. We have many opportunities. We have many freedoms. We are free to raise our families as we see fit, practice our faith, and work to support ourselves and live the lifestyle we want. Our world has been free of world wars for some 75 years, and the Cold War with the Soviet Union ended 30 years ago. Unemployment is low and the stock market is high. We have access to amazing technology. There is much to celebrate.

But, we are in need of peace. It seems we have turned inward on ourselves since the loss of a common enemy in the Soviet Union. Although our strength and natural barriers protect us, some fear we are not safe. Terrorist attacks like 9-11 fuel these fears. Others are fearful of those who are different. Many fears in our country are unrealistic and not based in fact, but promoted by trust in so-called experts who have found a way to promote their own self-interest (and pocketbooks). Sadly, these fears do not promote peace but acrimony among different people.

We have become more politically polarized. We have increasing problems working out differences. Policy issues such as immigration, climate change, and

health care, among others, divide us. Instead of working to resolve these issues, we are growing further apart. We are in need of peace.

Our lack of peace does not just exist in our federal government. Our children today are suffering from increased levels of anxiety and depression. As we have been reminded by recent events in California and during the trial of the Townville shooter, people are killing innocents at an alarming rate. The United Methodist church remains divided over human sexuality issues and seems headed towards a split. There is a total lack of peace. We are in need of something new.

As we go into the time of Advent, today's passage from Luke 1:67-80, is a prayer or Benedictus offered by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Earlier in the Lukan story, the angel Gabriel had come to Zechariah and told him that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son. This son would bring many of the people of Israel back to the Lord God and John the Baptist would be a pathfinder for the one who would deliver the people. Zechariah was shocked and told the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." Because of his disbelief, Zechariah is made silent until John the Baptist is born.

When John the Baptist is born, Zechariah is once again able to speak and offers the prayer which is our scripture today. Those in Israel at that time were looking forward to the deliverance of the people. The language of the Benedictus is

a statement of what God has done and will do for His people. The language is thoroughly covenantal and echoes phrases from the Old Testament. The births of John the Baptist and Jesus are part of God's fulfillment of His promises to Abraham and David in the Old Testament. Jesus was the "promised horn of salvation" in the Old Testament. John the Baptist and Jesus will be part of God's plan of salvation for the people.

The people of Israel had long expected that God's deliverance would take the form of deliverance from foreign powers. The deliverance would be a new exodus, as when the Israelites were freed from Egypt. The Israelites had a long history of being dominated by foreign powers, with their tragic exile in Babylon during the 6th century BC and their domination by Rome at the time of the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus. Although freed from exile by Cyrus the Great and allowed to return home and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple, for the most part they continued to be dominated by foreign powers. They were in need of peace.

The progression of thought in the Benedictus, shows, however, that the true end of God's redemption is not merely deliverance from political domination but the creation of conditions in which God's people can worship and serve God without fear. The ultimate purpose of God's salvation presupposes deliverance from the enemy but is in fact undisturbed worship. Holiness and righteousness are

the two important elements of the covenants and are to mark God's people "all the days of our life."

John's birth announced God's new deliverance. John would prepare the way for Jesus by turning the hearts of the parents to their children; by turning the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; and by making a people prepared. John would also "give knowledge of salvation" to the people, calling them to repentance and pointing them to Jesus. Through the knowledge of salvation, the new covenant, foreseen by Jeremiah (31:34) would be fulfilled and inaugurated. According to Jeremiah, the new covenant would mean each person would "know the law...and I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

The reference to the knowledge of God leads quickly to the announcement of "light to those who sit in darkness." The mark of the redeemed is that they live out of the knowledge of God that has been given to them. Darkness is dispelled by the revelation of God's grace towards us. Through John's call for "justice and righteousness" and through Jesus's exemplary ministry, "God would guide our feet into the way of peace." The "hand of the Lord" is within us. The hand of the Lord is present whenever one arises to call for peace and to bring deliverance to the oppressed and the estranged.

We must reflect on how peace is achieved. At the time we read this prayer or Benedictus, Israel was under the domination of Rome and the vassal King, Herod. The birth of Jesus itself is in the context of a decree from Caesar Augustus that the conquered people be enrolled by name and city. God was visiting the people in the midst of their oppression. But John the Baptist did not advocate taking up arms against the Romans to achieve peace. He did not supply weapons for insurrection. Keep in mind that peace that is achieved through strength is always vulnerable to the attack of one who is stronger.

The peace that is lasting is linked to the people turning to God. John the Baptist told the people to repent, not to make war. The Benedictus links the promises of salvation and redemption inseparably to the achievement of peace. God's people cannot have redemption without peace, for each is necessary for the realization of the other.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. We must always focus on who is the King and Lord of our lives. Is it Jesus? Do we truly follow Jesus or is our declaration of faith hollow? Hollow like the kingship of Herod. Herod was set up as the Jewish king, but his kingdom meant little to the Jewish people. His family was not Jewish by birth but had converted for political reasons. He used his position to gain money through taxes. He was not liked by the Jewish people. Many considered him false.

Today many in our country appear to have lost their way. They are in the dark. We must ask who is our King? Some place their faith in politicians. Some place their faith in those who are false prophets or ministers. Some place their faith in so-called experts who mislead by the media. These people are not the answer, and they are not doing anything good for the people.

The message we must take to the people is that they must live without fear in holiness and righteousness. We need to give them the good news of God's salvation that they can live in peace with undisturbed worship of God. We need to remind people to turn to God when they are in trouble. When God provided a child for the elderly couple Elizabeth and Zechariah, He shook up the world forever. When we seek to bring peace today, let's shake things up as well! Let us provide the saving message of Jesus Christ, Lord and King.