

“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel. He has come to His people and set them free.”

A Homily for Waterloo North Mennonite Church

9 December 2018 (Matins)

Texts: Luke 1: 67-79

(Len Friesen)

I read a lovely summary yesterday morning on how we all might read the bible. It is attributed to Augustine, the greatest of church fathers from the 4th century, who once observed that the Holy Scriptures were written in everyday language so that even a child might enter in and learn from them. But he also said that beneath these humble words lay untold riches and mysteries too deep to fathom without a grace that is the Holy Spirit's to give, whereby every word we read points to the eternal Word made flesh.

Surely the Canticle of Zachariah – which we've all just read together - is one of those great biblical texts which proves Augustine's point. On the one hand it is nothing more than a father's exuberant delight at the birth of his miracle child; but on the other this simple canticle contains untold riches and mysteries, every word of which points to Christ. No wonder the larger Church has encouraged the faithful to begin each and every day by reciting this Canticle aloud. And as part of the Catholic Office of Lauds (matins!), this Canticle is also one of the oldest set prayers in the church (going back more than 15 centuries. This also means it was part of our own faith tradition until just a few centuries ago, and may well be worth reclaiming. (Anglicans? More?)

As a matter of fact, I have begun that daily discipline over the past several years, and long ago memorized it, having recited it literally thousands of times. For all that, I continue to marvel at both its child-like simplicity and its great depth. Each day I see something new to ponder, as if I'm seeing it for the first time. I hope that you might consider taking your Matins order of service home with you today and have it lay around your house so that you might also add this Canticle to the mix of your daily devotions. Who knows what riches it might open up for you?!

To that end I have little to say about the Canticle's initial proclamation by Zechariah and will instead focus on what it offers us by way of reflection in our time.

And our time, the time we are living in, to be utterly clear in this Advent season, is the time in-between Christ having come long ago in manger rude, and his Second

coming when he will judge the living and the dead, and his Kingdom will have no end. That's where we find ourselves in 2018, between these two great manifestations of Immanuel, God-with us, and Advent in this or any church is akin to the sound of one hand clapping if it only celebrates the one event without the other. So what riches might a daily recitation of this Canticle offer to us as we wait in this Advent season for the return of the Lord in glory, the one born so long ago in Bethlehem? (turn to it, if you wish!)

First things first, this Canticle reminds us of who God is in this Advent season, and I especially appreciate how a recitation of it compels me to begin every day with praise of God (I'll have to do that even in the worst day of my life). Why praise? Well, its first proclamation is that God is Lord, a term which suggests God's omnipotence, as in Psalm 83: 18: "Let my foes know that you alone, whose name is Lord, are the Most High over all the earth." Not only is God Lord, that is matchlessly powerful, God also is shown to be compassionate, so much so that he sent a Savior, born of the house of his Servant David, to set us free.

That Savior, of course, is Jesus, who is also called Lord by Zechariah. It is the second and last time the word "Lord" is used in this Canticle. When we recite it, then, we are proclaiming to the world, and ourselves, that Jesus was no mere mortal. He was, he is, he ever shall be God, to the Glory of God the Father. The extravagant image that often comes to mind when I recite this is of the blood stained sword-mouthed lamb from the book of Revelation, the One who is already seated on the Throne with God and as God. I also appreciate how the tense is almost always impossible to determine in this Canticle. It is as if God has already sent a Savior once, long ago to Bethlehem, as if he is right now sending you the Savior you need, and as if he is certain to do so in the future so relax, whatever calamity you face (so chill!). Indeed, God's faithfulness through time hemorrhages out of this canticle.

So if that's how God is proclaimed in this Canticle, what about us? Well, simply put, the Canticle reminds us from start to finish that we are in need of being saved; we can't do it ourselves, which is why we need a Savior. Note that Zechariah doesn't give us a Jesus who will be a one-time superb but now dead role-model. Instead he proclaims Jesus the everlasting Savior, and I'm long wondered if most of the enemies Jesus has to save us from aren't of the self-inflicted kind. In particular I love the

imagery of Jesus as Himself the tender compassion of God which will break upon us from on high like the dawn. I love how this same Jesus our Savior, Jesus our Lord God, will shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death. (Good news!)

So let me ask you, how does the language of “salvation in Christ” sit with you. Is it Waterloo North’s core proclamation as a church? Do you personally feel the need to be saved by Him, or would you rather settle for Jesus the role model whom you can selectively apply? [I have this image from a Menno Conference I attended so many years ago;;;] There is a reason why the language of salvation in Christ has historically been the great consolation to the persecuted church, including our Anabaptist forebears, and a threat of immense proportion to the Affluent and Acculturated church. I suppose we know where we are in this narrative and what our temptation and challenge will be.

And this leads to one other aspect of this Canticle that I want to highlight, and it is the 2nd part of it, the part that begins: “You my child shall be called the prophet of the most high..” Of course, Zechariah was referring here to his son John the future baptizer, but the beauty of Scripture is that it speaks as timelessly in our time as it did when it was first uttered. Thus we recite this Canticle to remind ourselves, daily, that we have no greater calling in life than to prepare the way for the coming of our God.

We are called to go before the Lord, that is, before Jesus the Christ, to prepare his way, and to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of sins. I have marveled at that turn of phrase in the Canticle for years: that people will come to know of their salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. By contrast, it’s safe to say that we live at a time where we may be more comfortable promising salvation to all by simply declaring beforehand that sin does not exist. Yet according to this Canticle we can only become convicted of our salvation once we acknowledge our sins and are forgiven them. What a remarkable consolation!

I’ll stop here. I both welcomed and feared this homily as soon as I saw the texts assigned for the day I had agreed to, as I continue to believe that this Canticle is well beyond my grasp regardless of how many times I’ve recited it. May it also invade your heart, perhaps even every morning, in this Advent season and beyond. And may

Zechariah's profound proclamation open our hearts and minds to who God is, who we are, and who we are called to be in this advent season.

In closing, please join me in reading once again this Canticle, followed by the Gloria.