**Benedictus**

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Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

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Luke 1:68-79

**Introduction and back story**

Today’s gospel reading is one of the three hymns found in the first chapters of the gospel of Luke. There’s Mary’s song, the *Magnificat* that she sings in wonder and glory that she would be chosen to bear the Son of God. There’s Simeon’s song, the *Nunc Dimittis*, that he sings in wonder and glory that he had seen, with his own eyes, the promised Messiah.

And today’s song goes by the name of the *Benedictus*. In Luke’s poetical account, it’s a song sung by Zechariah. We are perhaps familiar with the story. Zechariah was a priest married to Elizabeth. Both were well-known for their piety and family, but, like everyone, they had sadness in their lives. Their sadness was that they could not have any children, and they were well past the age when you have any hope of conceiving a child.

But then a miracle occurs: the angel Gabriel, who was the same angel whom God would send to talk to Mary, appears to Zechariah just as he was fulfilling his special duty in the central temple of the Jews. Gabriel tells Zechariah that he and Elizabeth will, in fact, have a child, whom they are to name “John.” And not just any child, but a special one: someone like the prophet Elijah of old, who would help prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

Zechariah, naturally perhaps, is doubtful. He is very well aware of his age and Elizabeth’s. Gabriel, naturally perhaps, is surprised as Zechariah’s doubt. I think he is unused to being doubted, especially since he comes as a messenger of God. So Zechariah is temporarily struck with a disability: he is unable to speak, and probably to hear, until the baby arrives.

And Elizabeth, who, Luke tells us, was a relative of Mary’s, does become pregnant. And, as the angel promised, it was a boy. And Elizabeth, Zechariah, and all their friends and relations were very happy about that. On the eighth day, they brought the baby to be circumcised, as expected by the Jewish law, where he would welcomed into the Jewish community and named. Everyone expected them to name the baby “Zechariah” after the father. Of course, Elizabeth and Zechariah remember what the angel said, and tells the crowd that he name was to be “John,” just as Gabriel had commanded.

The people sign to Zechariah to see if he is serious. He confirms it, but writing down, “His name is John.” And, at that moment, he is able to hear and speak again, and being a pious man, began to praise God.

The *Benedictus* is a hymn that Luke records Zechariah as singing. We called the *Benedictus* because the first words of the hymn in Latin are, “Benedictus Dominus Deus Israe,” Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel.”

**What the *Benedictus* says**

Like Mary’s *Magnificat*, the *Benedictus* echoes the great songs and psalms of the Old Testament. We hear echoes of Miriam and Moses singing after the parting of the Red Sea: “I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously” (Exodus 15:1-21). We hear echoes of Hannah singing, “My heart exults in the LORD” (1 Samuel 2:1-10). We hear Isaiah singing, “Comfort, comfort my people” and “The voice of one crying, ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD” (Isaiah 40).

It’s is written in two parts: the first part is a blessing to God (verses 68-75), and the second part is sung to his son John (verses 76-79).

What does Zechariah bless God for? For remembering and redeeming Israel, and sending the promised Messiah. He knows that his son is not the Messiah, but the one who is preparing the way for him. He remembers the great promises of the Scriptures, especially the prophets, that God would rescue and redeem Israel, in fulfillment of God’s promise made all the way to the very beginnings of the Israelite people, when God promised Abraham to make a great people.

And Zechariah had reason for sorrow, for thinking that his people “sat in darkness and the shadow of death,” because for centuries the historic areas of Palestine had been ruled by foreign powers, who often prevented the Jews from proper worship. Zechariah especially looks forward to the aftermath of God’s rescue: to be without fear as they worshiped and to live in holiness and righteousness.

Last week we talked about fear a lot. Zachariah tells us what freedom of fear allows us to do: to worship God in holy, righteous living, at peace with one another.

And then he turns to sing to his son, marveling that he would be the one who fulfilled Isaiah’s vision, to be the one who prepared the way for the long-expected Messiah. A new dawn, a new light, would come to those who sat in darkness.

Zechariah sees this promise being fulfilled in his own son, and he delights in it. But I think he doesn’t know the half of it! Israel is sitting in darkness, overshadowed by Roman rule, unable in many ways to worship God as they desired. But what he doesn’t see is that the Romans, too, are sitting in darkness. They are outside, looking in. And not only the Romans, but the Africans, the Asians, and all the people of the earth. They do not see the light of God. Although Zechariah does not see it, the light is dawning not just for the daughters and sons of Abraham, but for the entire world. “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 fee into the way of peace.”

**Lauds**

As I was preparing for today, the one thing that struck me very strongly is how this (and the other songs of Luke) link us to the church in all times and places.

Consider: this song has been read and sung in the church from the earliest days of its existence.

Consider: wherever the church spread, this song came with it. “From Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and the ends of the earth.” As the church spread in what we call the Mideast, to modern day Turkey, to Africa, to Europe, to Asia, to North and South America, Christians have been singing this song. The song connects us to this history.

Consider: wherever the church is now, this song is being read and sung. Whoever is using the same lectionary as us is reading the song today. The song connects us to them.

Did you know that the *Benedictus* is even part of some people’s daily prayers? Historically, it’s been part of the Catholic church’s daily office of lauds or matins (services sung in the morning), and it’s part of the daily office of the Anglican and Episcopal church. *Every day*.

So, this morning, I want to do something a little different. I want us to learn how to do a chanted version of this hymn.

(Pass out chant sheets and explain).

Which Christians does it make you treasure this morning?