"Zechariah, Elizabeth and the Promise" Advent 2C. December 6, 2009, Grace Lutheran Church, Port Townsend, WA. Malachi 3:1-4, Philippians 1:3-11. Luke 1:5-25, 57-67, 68-79 (read together), 3:1-6.

Luke 1:68-79

68 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us 74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
78 By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

It was a rough road for Zechariah and Elizabeth. Children of priestly families, they did their best to live up to the blameless expectations of their heritage. Once married, they looked forward to raising their own children according to the same standards. But disgrace fell quietly upon the family. Year after year Elizabeth's friends brought children into the world and she did not. The main purpose of her life – to have a son – was denied, and so slowly and sadly she made peace with her fate.

Zechariah, too, had become resigned to this sadness in his house. He was quietly pitied by his friends; he took interest and joy in his nephews, the

children of the village, other people's kids. But long ago he gave up hope for his own family to grow.

Zechariah's priestly relatives surely felt sorry for him. Maybe this should be his year to offer incense in the annual ritual at the temple in Jerusalem. Whether they arranged that the lot should fall to him or not, it fell to him this year by the sheer grace of God.

And there he was, alone in the Holy of Holies. This was the place of visions, the place where the ancient prophet Isaiah had received God's call to ministry, had seen six-winged angels flying around God's throne. Zechariah's brother priests waited outside the door; the other men waited behind them. The women behind them. Zechariah prayed for his people, asked God to forgive them, to have mercy, to protect them yet another year. And outside, the people prayed for Zechariah.

Zechariah was then overcome by the presence of God and God's messenger Gabriel with an unbelievable announcement. He and old Elizabeth will have a son, and this son will be – like Malachi of 400 years ago – a messenger of God's redeeming power for his people.

Stunned, Zechariah staggers out of the holy place. Mute, he goes through the motions of his priestly work and returns home. He manages to communicate with Elizabeth; she learns to care for her troubled husband, learns to understand his expressions and gestures. When her suspicions of pregnancy are finally confirmed, she ventures out of her home once again after months of quiet seclusion.

For so long I have longed for this child.
Year after year, I felt I failed;
I was the most miserable of women.
But now everyone smiles at me; they congratulate me;
I'm so happy!
Now I know that prayers can be answered;
now I know that the deepest longings of the heart can take flesh.
I will be the best mother there ever was!

Her son is finally born, named John, and begins his own journey of faith. Raised by his priestly parents, dedicated to a life of abstinence from any grape or wine, growing his hair long like Samson of old, John begins to live

a life holy to the Lord. He will be known as John the Baptist; he will be the one to baptize many – including his cousin Jesus – in the Jordan River.

His sermons will be fiery and he will call people to repent. But most importantly, John will be known as the one who prepared the way for Jesus. Thus he is the perfect image of Advent preparation for Christmas.

But back to today's extended Gospel story.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had long ago given up on having a son, so this baby, this child John, was a great gift. But if you listen to Zechariah's song, which we read together, there is more to it than joy over a new baby.

Zechariah sings of God's salvation. It's all happening, not to make Zechariah and Elizabeth happy parents, but so this child will prepare people for the One to come – this will be Jesus – who will enter this world "by the tender mercy of our God." It's all about the "knowledge of salvation … by the forgiveness of sins."

A young child – like baby John – holds tightly to his mother's neck, believing if he lets go, he might fall to the ground. As he grows sleepy, he becomes anxious, for as he falls asleep, his arms start to loosen around his mother. He jerks awake and regains his strong hold. He is safe, however; his mother will not let him fall. It is good news for him. Better yet, would be the ***knowledge*** of this security. Zechariah proclaims that his child John will "go before the Lord . . .to give ***knowledge*** of salvation to the people." Not only are we saved, but we will have the knowledge of it!

This story is all about the promise of God – God's covenant with humanity. It started with the first people, was affirmed with Abraham and Sarah, was continued in the line of Davidic kings, extends down the ages to you and me in the coming of Jesus Christ.

Elizabeth and Zechariah were not the only people broken by the sadness of life's dreams denied and then overjoyed by God's goodness. We are not the only people troubled by our own actions, sins or circumstances – and blessed with words of grace. Those of us who are anxious and worried are reminded of the thanksgiving text about taking no thought for the morrow. John, the longed-for child, grew up to live alone in the wilderness. To some of us the workplace, the kitchen table, the shopping mall feel like the

wilderness. The bills, the confusion of value choices, the personal relationships we seek to nurture or avoid – these sometimes feel like the wilderness.

God sent the young man John as a messenger, a voice crying in the wilderness, proclaiming words of salvation for every human being. God desires to rescue you from your enemies: from worry, from aimlessness, from overwork, from hurt feelings. The wilderness becomes a place of respite. Prayers can be answered. The deepest longings of the heart can take flesh!

Zechariah was terrified and traumatized by his experience of serving God in the temple. Now he sings that God makes it possible for us to "serve him without fear." How can this be? It will be because God's faithful promise includes not only the birth of John, but, soon, the birth of Jesus. Jesus will fulfill God's promise of forgiveness, healing, new life. In Christ, God makes us holy and gives us the strength to be generous, compassionate, and joyful.

The dawn from on high breaks upon us – as faithfully and beautifully as the dawn breaks these winter mornings over our mountains -- to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. Christ has come; Christ comes again. May this be the Advent joy in your heart and home. Amen.