

# Sermon: Song of Zachariah

Luke 1:57-80

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How to prepare for meeting with God? The period of Advent is meant to make us ready to celebrate Christmas and to make us aware that we will all meet with God one day.

For a period of four weeks we have lived in anticipation of how God long ago came to us in a manger - and we ask ourselves, what must we do in order to be ready to meet with God today.

Now we look at the prayer of Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist; when John was born, his father prayed a wonderful prayer, full of meaning.

Zachariah helps us to know what we must do. In half an hour we meet with God in Holy Eucharist. Later this week it is Christmas; how shall we come to God?

## **Expectation**

First, we learn from Zachariah the expectation that God will save us from our darkness.

The birth of John the Baptist was a rather miraculous affair. An angel announced to his father Zachariah that he and his old wife would have a son. Zachariah did not believe the message so he was muted by God. But when the boy was born, he could speak again.

No wonder 'all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea.' The birth of John and the surrounding events were the talk of the day and people wondered, what sort of boy is this? 'For the hand of the Lord was with him.'

Something was happening; God had been absent from the land for so long; the darkness was so deep. And is God now going to do something marvelous again in our lives? In our time?

There is much darkness in our world. The scale of destruction and misery in the area where we live is sickening. Millions of people are scattered from their homes.

The situation in Egypt is also not hopeful. I do not have to go into the details of the situation; living here, we experience it first hand.

And on as personal level we know darkness. People get awful diseases. Friends die too young. We lose friends and family members each year, especially as we grow older.

Relationships go wrong. We fight at work. And we have so many dark corners in our hearts and minds. Where is God?

Face your darkness, your fears, your problems, your sins, and do this without hesitation because we have the comforting promise that God will enter into your darkness to offer hope - he comes not to condemn but to save those who believe in him.

And God made a great beginning; In the midst of our darkness, He has come to us in Jesus Christ. Zechariah, speaks of Jesus as

...the rising sun who will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death." (Luke 1:78b-79)

These words of Zechariah echo what was said centuries before by the Jewish prophet Malachi. In Mal 4:2 the prophet said:

For you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise, with healing in its wings, and you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.

Young calves and other animals, when having been caged in darkness for too long, can jump so joyfully through the grass when they are released. That shows something of the joy God gives to those to whom He come to save.

So we prepare for meeting with God, by expecting him to act. To save. To give joy.

### **But what does this saving mean?**

To save... That is a word we use a lot in church, but what does this saving, this salvation, mean?

Zachariah summarizes all the promises of God. He says in Luke 1:74-75 that our Lord Jesus came...

...to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Israel was living in a time with real enemies. The armies of Rome occupied the land and the people were treated badly by the rulers. In our days, not much is new...

Even until now, we still suffer under regimes that mistreat the people and especially the people of God.

The real rescue is not that God puts us straight into paradise after the coming of Jesus. The real rescue is, that he enables us to serve him, and to do so *without fear*.

Fear is a worse enemy than whatever bad regime may rule, and more disastrous than any problem we face. Because fear makes our hearts and our minds unable to look up to God and to live a life of joy. Fear makes darkness rule our minds and hearts. If we fear, then the forces of darkness have won.

The coming of Jesus has liberated us from fear. He has shown us the heart of God – a heart full of love for us. And he has shown that he is more powerful than death. He is the King of all rulers. He has opened the gates of paradise for us.

Yes, there is much darkness. But we must not fear. In the face of whatever happens to us, let us be fearless. Let us follow our own Lord Jesus Christ. He came as a vulnerable baby to a world full of dangers, and in the midst of that and through all problems, he was not beaten by fear.

In the face of our darkness – Jesus Christ rules. He came for the forgiveness of your sins, He made your life good with God, and He stands beside you for your defense.

Jesus Christ came to rescue us from our enemies - people, sin, evil powers - not by taking those enemies away from us – but by making us fearless.

so how do we prepare for the coming of God, for meeting with God? To our expectation we have added fearlessness. Be brave. Our circumstances do not have the last word as God is in control. And of God we are not afraid as he forgives our sins through Jesus Christ.

But this fearlessness is not a goal in itself. Salvation is not meant to make us sit back and relax. It is to enable us to serve God. That is what Christmas is about. God coming to our world to bring light in our darkness, so that our lives would be changed and serve him.

Zachariah, in his prayer, explains this 'serving' a bit further. He points in Luke 1:75 to how we have to serve God. That is,

### **In holiness and righteousness**

"In holiness and righteousness, before him, all our days."

Holy means, set apart for God. Separated from evil and living in this world as a follower of Jesus Christ. For God alone.

We want to serve God in righteousness as well, that is, we want to do what is right in regard to all people.

How can we do this? Only with the help of God. The only way to serve him in holiness and righteousness is if we are 'before him all our days', as Zachariah says.

Being before God means to relate to him face to face. Jesus Christ has made it possible that we relate in such a way with God. He opened the doors of heaven and invites us to be with God, to pray to him, to live with him. In deep communion with God, we are enabled to be holy and righteous in the midst of our present darkness.

Let us be people who are 'before him all our days'. It is certainly my own goal to spend more time in prayer and with God and his word in the year ahead of us, and I hope to be able to take you along in this. Together with my Sudanese and Egyptian clergy here, we have therefore decided, for instance, to celebrate Holy Communion here each day. And the church will be open most mornings for anyone who wants to take time for prayers.

And we will listen more to God, by opening his word, and by creating a desert of silence around us - the possibility to listen to him quietly.

The Christmas child came for our rescue. To make us fearless in our service to God. He wants our holiness and righteousness. That we live for God and for other people.

And we can only do so if we live in a relationship of love and prayer with God all of our days.

To guide our feet into the path of peace. This is the will of God for us... to guide our feet into the path of peace.

Jesus is the one who lightens our path, if we live close to him and his word. He shows us where to go, how to live. And that is summarized by this one word: peace.

Actually, by the *path of peace*. It is a road we are on. Peace is not just a sentimental Christmas feeling, feeling good, it is above all a lifestyle.

If we fear and hate and damage other people, we live like our enemies and then our enemies have certainly beaten us. The only acceptable answer to evil is goodness. The only answer to violence is the search for peace. Christmas is above all the time of peace. Maybe not always of feeling peace, but certainly of doing peace.

## Conclusion

Now we all know that even for people who want to follow Jesus Christ, relationships can still go wrong. And we still have our fights. And I have not seen statistics that Christians live longer than non-Christians – we all get diseases, we all die, and sometimes sadly young.

And we still have so many dark corners in our hearts and minds, and we find it hard to let other people look into this.

But there is one thing Christians cannot avoid. Because we believe in the one who shines light in our world and into our life, we cannot avoid *change*.

We are pushed forward by him to walk on that way of peace, on the way of serving God in holiness and righteousness. His light shows us our darkness, and it helps us to walk more and more toward Him and his lifestyle.

Let us strongly resolve to serve Him, to serve our families and friends, to love him all of our days, and to walk on the way of peace, to be peacemakers in this time when that is so needed. Then we are ready to meet with our God.

**Amen**