
Zechariah's Song

SCOTT HOEZEE

As Luke tells the story to us in the gospel bearing his name, when the Son of God came to this earth, the creation responded with a whole lot of singing. The first two chapters of Luke contain no fewer than four very important songs, as the people getting caught up in God's great climax of salvation found that they just could not contain their wonder and joy. When you are busting with the joy of God's salvation, it is going to overflow, and in Luke 1 and 2, that overflow meant a lot of singing. Today on *Groundwork*, we will look at the second of these songs as sung by the priest, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are now in our second program, Dave, of our Advent series, looking at those songs in Luke. We looked at Mary's song, which is often called the *Magnificat*; and now, today, we go to a song that comes very near the end of Luke's very long, 80-verse chapter – some of these early chapters in Luke are very, very long – and we are coming up to a man named Zechariah, who is married to a woman named Elizabeth, who get caught up in a different way, but in a very important way, in this whole climax of salvation.

DAVE BAST

Yes, if you compared the four Gospels, it really makes interesting reading to see how each begins, two in particular; Mark begins very abruptly. The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, I think he says. And Luke will go some 30 verses before the name Jesus even appears. If you started out reading Luke and you came to it cold, you would not know exactly what you were getting into because there is this little intro where he is addressing Theophilus, this friend of his, or perhaps maybe he is the ideal reader he represents; and then he plunges into – all of a sudden, you are in a story about an elderly Jewish couple, and the guy is a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, and in Luke 1:7, we are tipped off; if you are a savvy biblical reader, anyway, you are tipped off because in Luke 1:7, we are told – talking about this Zechariah, who is a priest, and Elizabeth, but they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both well-advanced in years; and if you are an astute, alert biblical reader, it is like: Ding, ding, ding, ding....

DAVE BAST

Yes, the bell starts going off. Hey, I remember other people like that. There was Sarah and Abraham, and Rebecca and Isaac, and Rachel and Jacob, and Hannah and her husband; and they were all longing to have children – childlessness for the Jewish woman was the ultimate disgrace. For them, the idea was that the woman was somehow cursed or her womb was closed or she was barren...

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it was a source of sadness, of course, for the couple, but a source of shame; but is also curious enough, and this began, as you just said, Dave, it began in Genesis, where for whatever the reason, God often chooses people who seem like there are not good candidates for having children because they never were able to; and yet, those are the people whom God often taps. It is a sign of his grace; this is all about God. Abraham and Sarah did not have Isaac on their own strength or because they got lucky in their old age; this was God's work; and so also here, we know something is going to happen, and it is going to involve having a child with this older couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. So, we know something is going on, and once we get just a little bit further into Luke Chapter 1, starting at the 13th verse, we get a hint of what that is; and let's hear that earlier part of the story.

DAVE BAST

¹¹Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him (that is, Zechariah), standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear – which incidentally, is what always happens when a real angel shows up; it is not like a cuddly little cherub...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; they are frightening.

DAVE BAST

These are scary beings – gripped with fear, ¹³but the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth. ¹⁵For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, he is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God, ¹⁷and he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and the power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there it is; the announcement that something amazing is going to happen. They will be able to have a child after all in their old age; and he is going to be a very, very important figure in the history of Israel. Now interestingly, in the next verse...

DAVE BAST

And also, incidentally, a delight to them. I am sure they picked up on that part...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Of course, of course; a joy and a delight to you.

DAVE BAST

Maybe more importantly, significant for the people of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And, Zechariah, I think very logically, says in verse 18: How can that be? We are old; we are past the years of childbearing.

Now, in the last program, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and said: You are going to have a child even though you are a virgin. And Mary said: How can this be? And the angel said: It is going to be this way, and he explained it.

DAVE BAST

Yes, nice little explanation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Here, Zechariah says: Well, how can this be? We are old. And Gabriel seems to get a little bit piqued; he seems to get a little bit ticked off. He says: Hey, I stand in the presence of God and I am telling you the truth; and because you doubted me, you are going to lose your voice for nine months. You will not be able to speak until the baby is born.

So, I am not quite sure why Zechariah...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; what is up with that?

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, Mary asked, “How can this be?” and it was like: Oh, that is fine. It will be.... And Zechariah says, “How can this be?” and the angel says: Well, you doubted me, so...

I don’t know; maybe you expect more of a priest.

DAVE BAST

I do not know; or maybe there is precedent for Zechariah’s situation, and he should have thought of all those examples of people who were past the prime, and yet, still had a child. Whereas, Mary, it was truly unprecedented, since she was a virgin, “how can it be” is a fairly reasonable question. With Zechariah, he should have taken the angel’s word for it. Maybe that is the best we can come up with.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, he is in the line of Aaron, so he is in the priestly line, and had been a priest. He is standing in the Temple of God. I suppose it is interesting, you should not be surprised to see an angel in the Temple of God, and yet, even for the people of Israel, it was a surprise; but in any event, this is the setup for what comes next, as Zechariah is going to lose his voice. He will not be able to speak until the child is born, and I guess that probably gave him a lot of time to think and to ponder everything that the angel had said to him.

DAVE BAST

Yes; he comes out of the Temple and the people are waiting there; now, remember – only the priest could enter the Temple itself. No one else was allowed in; and even Zechariah was not allowed into the holiest part – sort of the back room of the Temple, where in times past the Ark had stood. By this time, the Ark had disappeared. So, he is just in the holy place in front of the curtain, and he is offering incense there. So, when he comes out, the crowd senses something has happened. They said he must have seen a vision. So, he makes something known to them by hand signals, and then off he goes. His tour of duty is over and he goes back to Elizabeth, and lo and behold, what happens? She becomes pregnant. Wonderful! That is going to lead Zechariah to come out of his time of meditation and burst forth into song when the child is finally born, as we will see next.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And let’s now get to it, as we have been thinking, Dave, about Zechariah and Elizabeth. They are going to be the parents of John the Baptist. They were well-along in years, but as is God’s pattern in scripture, he takes a couple that is very unlikely to have a child and helps them to have a child because it is going to be a significant player in the course of salvation.

So, we fast-forward to the end of Luke 1 here; in between, we have had Elizabeth and Mary get together and Mary's song, which we looked at in the previous program of this series; so, we flash-forward nine months or so; Elizabeth has the child. On the 8th day for the circumcision rite at the Temple, they bring the child forth and everybody is saying: Oh, look at the little baby! Look at cute little baby Zechariah. Because, of course, you name the baby after the father, and Elizabeth says: No, no, no, no. His name has to be John. And it is an instant scandal; they are not related to anybody named John. You are not supposed to do that. So, then they go to Zechariah, and even though he is only unable to speak, they must think he is deaf, too, because we are told they make symbols and signs to him – I do not know why we always assume that people with one thing they cannot do, they cannot do anything else – but finally Zechariah* writes: No, his name must be John; because that is the angel told him, and immediately, he can speak.

DAVE BAST

Luke writes: ^{1:64}His mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all of these things. Isn't that wonderful?!

It makes me think of the great hymn, "O, for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer' praise," so, his tongue is loosed and he pours forth these words of praise.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which again, he has had nine months to think about it; so, out it comes starting at verse 68, where he says – sings, really: Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant, David. ⁷⁰As he said through his holy prophets of long ago; ⁷¹salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, ⁷²to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath he swore to our father Abraham ⁷⁴to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

DAVE BAST

And then he goes on and addresses the baby, John, himself: ⁷⁶"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him; ⁷⁷to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven, ⁷⁹to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." Beautiful stuff!

Scott Hoezee: That is a song.

DAVE BAST

That is poetry, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is so much going on in this song. This thing is packed and bristles with theology and history.

DAVE BAST

I love the way he begins by focusing on God's remembering. Mary does that at the end of her song – the song that we looked at last week – but this whole idea that: Hey, God has remembered us!

I was reading in the Psalms just recently, Psalm 74, which is one of those: How long, O Lord? psalms; it is correct to say, and the psalmist says there: Take your hand out of your garment. It is like we would say in our day: Hey, God; when are you going to take your hands out of your pockets and get to work and roll up your sleeves and come and save us? God, when?! Here, Zechariah says: It is starting; it is starting now, and it is starting with this child of mine.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what is common to Mary's song, the *Magnificat*, we looked at last time, and now this one is, indeed, saying exactly – everybody, as you read a moment ago, Dave, everybody was abuzz; something is going on

with Zechariah and Elizabeth. This kid is going to be something amazing. Look at what happened; there are these portents and signs, and something is going on; something else; there is something new going on here; but both Mary and her song, and now in this song, Zechariah said: Well, yes; it is new to us; but it is not new to God. This is part of his covenant with Abraham; so, Zechariah roots it well into history. This is something God has been up to since the beginning; since evil and sin came into this world, this is part of a bigger story; our chapter in this story is new for us, but it is not new to God because this is part of an old, old story that has been unfolding ever since God decided that he was going to save us from our sins.

DAVE BAST

Yes, he mentions part of that old story in verse 69 when he says, “He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant, David; as he said through his holy prophets of long ago.” That is a summary of all of the key points in Old Testament history. That horn of salvation means – a horn is a symbol of strength – he is really talking about the Messiah; the promised descendent of David; and he says it in the past tense, although it is still future, because it has kind of happened; John the Baptist, Zechariah’s son, is not the horn of salvation. He was not born into the family of David; he was born into the family of Aaron, the priest. So, Zechariah points out: My boy is going to be the forerunner – the way preparer – but what God’s covenant promises center on is this coming one from David, who is going to be our real savior.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, he is *that* one; the one whose way John is going to clear and prepare. This son now that they have just now named John; he is going to be the long awaited Elijah-type figure who is going to prepare the way. So, he does turn, in the second part of the song, which you read a moment ago, Dave, he turns to the little kid and there is this kind of charming portrait of this older man finally having a son, and looking down into the little kid’s face and looking into his eyes and saying, “And you, my son; you are going to be a prophet of the most high God;” and what you are going to ignite in history – what you are going to usher in is going to end up being nothing less than salvation; the forgiveness of sins; the rising of a light for those who live in the valley of the shadow. It is a Psalm 23 allusion there. The valley of the shadow of death – a light is going to come. All of the dark places of our lives – all the things that trouble us and make us cry and make us sorrowful, that bring us low, that separate us from God, that separate us from each other – it is all going to be healed. What an amazing set of promises: That you, my child, are going to be the one who ushers that in through the One who is coming.

DAVE BAST

The other really interesting thing here is the idea that there needs to be someone to prepare the way for the one who is going to be the savior. It is like those prophecies of Isaiah: Level the roads. Put the high places low and raise up the low places. Create a straight way through the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord; and that will be John’s role; and the way he will do it is by inviting people to repent; to turn away from their sins, turn back to God. There is still going to have to be a way of salvation for them. God is going to have to do that work; but they can prepare for it by, again, humbling themselves and looking to God for grace.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, God is bringing in a whole new world, and he is ushering in a whole new time, and that it a great comfort. It was a great comfort then, in anticipation, and now in this Advent season of our lives, it is a great comfort for us; and we will consider how and why that is so comforting in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*. We are working our way through the song of Zechariah, which really focuses on his son, John; John the Baptist, as we know him; and the need for preparation – for preparing the way for the Savior to come, and all the wonderful things that will happen when that Savior comes; but it is interesting to think about the contrast between Advent and Christmas a little bit, isn’t it Scott? We keep pushing, in the church, many of us today, for Advent – let’s hold off on Christmas; especially as the world celebrates Christmas – and ties in a little bit to Mary’s song, which

was so revolutionary in economic terms. It is not about buying and selling and accumulating. God's coming into the world is a challenge to all that; and maybe it is good for us to use these weeks of preparation to focus more on what he is up to in the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is why it often strikes me, and people who listened to me preach over the years probably got used to me railing against some of Hallmark sentimentality a bit, but we often do take the Christmas season and we put a big, thick, layer of overly sweet frosting over the top of it, and sometimes you get the feeling that people's aspirations for Christmas is no more than just creating a little cozy environment, prettying up the house, having a little eggnog, and maybe just having a little, good family time and that is sort of like our highest goal. And so, Zechariah comes along in this song and he essentially says: Look, if you want to think about Advent and Christmas and what God is doing, your aspirations are too small; your dreams are too little; think big. God is up to something absolutely amazing that his son, John – soon to be known as John the Baptist – will prepare the way for. So, dream big. Think big. God is doing something way bigger than a Hallmark card or some nice Norman Rockwell painting of coziness.

DAVE BAST

It is not about my little, personal comfort, or having fun when my kids and grandkids come home – home for the holidays – over the river and through the woods – pull up in the sleigh and...

SCOTT HOEZEE

I'll be home for Christmas.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; all that kind of stuff. Even when that happens, give thanks for it. That is lovely. That is wonderful. The love of family or friends; but that is not enough. That is not enough for God to come into the world to create. I mean, if he is going to go to all the trouble of becoming a human being, taking our flesh on himself, fulfilling all obedience to the Law itself – his own Law – and then dying in our place and rising from the dead; it is not just to give us a nice turkey dinner, and then we can adjourn and watch football.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, and that is why Zechariah says: God is rolling back death. God is rolling back evil. God is rolling back sin. God is restoring shalom, and that is big thinking.

So, it is the Gospel in preview is what you get in Zechariah's song here, which fits well for John the Baptist, who was the previewer of the kingdom of God by calling for repentance. However, even though, of course, as you just said, too, Dave, Jesus did not do all that work just to give us a warm glow on the hearth with the stockings hung by the fire with care or something. However, it is also true that in this month of December, and during Advent, it is often a hard time for a lot of families. They miss loved ones who have died. There is brokenness; there is dysfunction; there are people whose kids will not come home because they do not ever want to see Mom and Dad again...

DAVE BAST

Yes, but don't you think that part of the reason it is a hard time is that we put too much freight into the sentimental kinds of aspects of it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Oh, I think so; absolutely, that is what focuses it for us; and oftentimes we also miss the boat, I think, with that; but you know, if somebody dies suddenly at the end of June, you never hear anybody say – in the United States, anyway – well, that will just ruin their Fourth of July.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But if somebody dies near the end of November or early December or middle of December, people will say: Well, that is going to ruin their Christmas; now there is sadness; you cannot have sadness at Christmas. Well, yes, you can, because it is for that sadness that Jesus came.

I think the way we have set up Christmas, that magnifies sorrow, it makes things feel even worse, but the fact is, there is sadness at all times, including at Christmas, but that is okay; that is why Jesus came into the darkness.

DAVE BAST

Exactly. Listen to these beautiful words again that he is saying:

⁷⁸“Because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven ⁷⁹to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death.”

The whole message – the whole story – is we are living in the shadows and we are living in darkness, and darkness will descend sooner or later, if it has not already, on us, but God will shine a light through that and give us hope and life and a future, and that is the testimony of the one who prepares the way for the Lord of Life himself to come.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is also why – and unfortunately, Dave, I do not know – more and more, it feels to me like we are, in many parts of the Church, losing half of Advent. Advent, as we said in the previous program, traditionally focused on both of Jesus’ comings – both of his arrivals – both of his advents. The Bethlehem one, the birth, but also the first Sunday in Advent usually anticipates his second coming, and typically in the tradition of the Church you read some of Jesus’ dark, Olivet discourses predicting the moon turning to blood and the sun going.... And all the apocalyptic stuff; and people do not seem to like that anymore, but if Jesus is not coming back; if there is no kingdom; if there is no rising sun from heaven that is going to shine on us living in the valley of the shadow of death, then the first Advent does not mean much either. So, we do need both. We cannot just say: Oh, we do not want to think about dark or dreary topics during Advent. We want it to be chipper and candlelight services and, no, you have to have the whole package, because that is why Jesus was born into this world in the first place.

DAVE BAST

I mentioned earlier the question of the Psalmist: How long, O Lord? And some of the great hymns of Advent, where they are still sung by the Church, have that same theme: Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free. We have been waiting a long time. We have been waiting now two thousand years, and we cry out: *Maranatha* – our Lord, come. Come, Lord Jesus. This is how we ought to be observing and celebrating Advent. We ought to be coming alongside those who are grieving and those who are struggling, or maybe we are doing that ourselves in our own lives right now.

You know, the great insight I heard once from Lewis Smedes, whom you knew and I knew; he said once: I do not pray “why” anymore about all of these problems and troubles; I pray “when”: *When* are you going to come and fix things, God? And that is the theme that we are trying to lift up here, I think, in this great season. God, when? Our prayer is “when.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Zechariah says it will come. It is coming; and through Jesus Christ, it is here; and that is the Good News of the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue to dig deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to hear next on *Groundwork*.

*Correction: In the audio of this episode, host Scott Hoezee misspeaks and says “John writes,” when he meant to say “Zechariah writes.”

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/zechariahs-song>

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