

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:5-21

“There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. 7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years. 8 So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, 9 according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. 10 And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. 11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. 13 But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. 15 For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” 18 And Zacharias said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years.” 19 And the angel answered and said to him, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. 20 But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time.”

"A Time Where He May Be Found"

This morning we continue our celebration of the season of Advent! It is a season of remembering the coming of Jesus:

- His coming as the little baby born in Bethlehem
- And His coming as the just judge of all, who comes at the end of history.

As many often say when confronting the massive commercialism of our day, Jesus is the reason for the season...

- Something we should NOT forget!

What I will be doing this season is moving through some of the major events that surround the birth of Jesus given to us in the Gospel accounts. This morning I will begin with the priest Zacharias, the man to whom the first pronouncement of the Angel Gabriel came: A hopeful message that Zacharias doubted and thus he would spend almost the next year in silence.

- It is a familiar story, so this morning I want to focus on how the prayers of this priest & the people were answered!

In recent months we have focused on Jesus in the Book of Beginnings because we know that we should see Jesus everywhere in the Scriptures...

- So this morning I will be using the 32nd Psalm as a way to focus on the importance of the Christmas story in this joyous season!

In Psalm 32 we find a promise that God is there to be found when we honestly pray too Him, something that Zacharias should have remembered as he prayed for the salvation of Israel in the Temple.

Psalm 32 is a Psalm of King David and it said to be a Contemplation. There is much there to contemplate, & it begins with a focus on the work that Jesus came to accomplish...

“Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered. 2 Blessed is the man to whom Jehovah does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit.”

There is great blessing for those who know Jesus as their Savior, knowing that their sin has been forgiven:

- **This is the only true joy to be found in the Christmas season.**
- **It is the joy that all of the stars & trees & presents and lights & feasts carols & manger scenes are to point us to, but they are very empty symbols if we look only to them!**

At bottom, such focus determines if this is a season of great joy or great sorrow and depression. King David quickly contrasts this joyful blessing with the burden of trying to please God or man ourselves.

3 “When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. 4 For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. Selah.”

- **No one knows for sure what “Selah” means but it is probably some sort of pause and possibly a musical interlude.**

King David was obviously one who needed to know that God was able and willing to forgive sins...

He was also one who was very honest with God when he was confronted by his sins...

Something that he focuses on in the next section of this Psalm...

5 “I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to Jehovah," And You forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah”

- **So both of the first two sections of this Psalm focus on the need and the reality of God’s forgiveness of sin.**

As we have said several hundred times from this pulpit...

- **Jesus came to save His people from their sins!**

This is what is proclaimed by those Christmas hymns that we love to sing this time of year [and why we sneak them in at other times as well]

- **From Comfort, Comfort Ye My People to Joy to the World we are celebrating the coming of Jesus because we are a people that needs great comfort and He is a Savior that brings Good News and Great Joy.**

Then we come in verse six to the theme of my message this morning...

6 “For this cause everyone who is godly shall pray to You in a time when You may be found;

For some of us who know Jesus as our Savior, we may look back to a particular time when we prayed for Jesus to be our Savior or we may be those raised in faithful covenant homes who have come each week to worship the Savior, confessing our sins and knowing that Jesus is a faithful Savior.

The Godly have the sure promise of God that He can be found and that we can know the forgiveness of our sins. However, we also know from the Scriptures that God may be known and can be found by all, even though many reject Him and His gracious offer of salvation.

This is why King David seems to go back and forth in this section...

6 “For this cause everyone who is godly shall pray to You in a time when You may be found;

Surely in a flood of great waters They shall not come near him. 7 You are my hiding place; You shall preserve me from trouble; You shall surround me with songs of deliverance. Selah

- Obviously King David repented and trusted God when He was near, praying as he did in Psalm 51:

“ 5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me. 6 Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom. 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. 8 Make me hear joy and gladness, That the bones You have broken may rejoice. 9 Hide Your face from my sins, And blot out all my iniquities. 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me.”

- This is the honest prayer of all those who have prayed to God when He was near...

But David then says in Psalm 32, “Surely in a flood of great waters They shall not come near him.”

- Now what should come to mind when we hear the words, “in a flood of great waters?”
- That’s right, the great flood in the time of Noah!

We know that Noah believed God and trusted Him when He was near, building the Ark that God would use to save he and his family.

- So, who else in the time of those great flood waters was saved?

The rest of humanity?

- Were they lost because God was never near them?

NO! They were lost because despite Noah preaching to them for over one hundred years, they rejected God and died in their sins.

- As David said, they would not come near to God when He was very near to them.

The history of the flood is recorded to teach us about the seriousness of sin and also to give us a graphic picture of the truth that the Apostle Paul gave us in the first chapter of Romans where he says, “18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them.

20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, 21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man--and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.”

So what is the truth that is suppressed? Paul says they suppress the truth that is within them: What we would call their conscience. And Paul also says they deny or suppress the evidence of God that surrounds them in His creation each and every day!

- Why did no one outside of Noah’s family join them on that Ark?

It was simply because they had suppressed the truth that had been evident to them for over 100 years.

Thus even as David declares that God is near to all who will turn to Him, he acknowledges that many will suppress the truth in unrighteousness. If you want a graphic picture of this from the New Testament, think of those proud religious leaders who stood at the foot of the cross as Jesus was taking on the very wrath of God upon Himself to save His people from their sins...

- Rather than cling to the God who was near, they mocked & challenged Jesus to come down from the cross and then they would believe on their own terms!
- They clearly chose the flood waters over the Ark!

We see such a contrast in the Christmas story itself when we think about the how the humble shepherds and the mighty King Herod reacted differently to miraculous signs from God saying that His Son was very near! First we have the shepherds who probably raised lambs for the Temple sacrifices that had pictured the sacrifice of Jesus, who has now come as THE Lamb of God! Luke tells us that as these shepherds watched their flocks, “behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.

10 Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. 11 For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 14 "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

These humble shepherds immediately went to see the Good News and found the baby Jesus laying in a manger, right where they might have expected to see a new born baby lamb!

King Herod on the other hand was told by Wise Men from the East that they had seen a great sign and had come to worship a new King, a King that Herod’s own scribes assured him would have been born in Bethlehem. Rather than joining them in worshipping the Savior who had come so near... This wicked King set out to destroy the baby Jesus slaughtering all of the infants and toddlers in the region of Bethlehem. King Herod chose the power of the sword over the humility of the manger...

- And soon after he was a dead man who knew well that he had chosen the flood waters of hell rather than the blessings of salvation.

The shepherds joined with their shepherd King David as he continues in our morning Psalm, “7 You are my hiding place; You shall preserve me from trouble; You shall surround me with songs of deliverance. Selah”

- They believed the promise of God and trusted Jesus to save them!

Luke tells us that these shepherds then went out and spread the Good News just as David does in Psalm 32: 8 “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye. 9 Do not be like the horse or like the mule, Which have no understanding, Which must be harnessed with bit and bridle, else they will not come near you.”

Again we have the Psalmist giving us a startling picture of the contrasting choices we can make when God is near... There are no surprises for God in history... He was not shocked when no one joined Noah, and He was not caught off-guard when King Herod rejected His plan of salvation. God had Joseph take the baby Jesus to safety in Egypt and had even foretold through the Prophet Jeremiah, the great sorrow that would result from Herod’s wicked actions.

Jesus knew from the beginning that Judas would betray Him on that fateful night in the garden of Gethsemane. Yes, it is a mystery to us, when we try to fully understand how God uses even the most wicked of actions on the part of these men to accomplish His ends...

- Like the crucifixion of Jesus!

These men and women are the horses or mules in the example of the Psalmist where they are led around by a bridle and a bit in their mouth doing the bidding of their master.

On the other hand, as those who have prayed to Him while he is near, we hear the words of Jesus through the Psalmist: ““I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye.”

What a beautiful picture of our relationship with God: He is the faithful Father or Teacher or Friend that we trust completely, not directed by the bridle or a bit in our mouth, but by His wise words of instruction & the leading of His all-seeing eye.

- **This is truly the goal of the Godly instruction and discipline that we give our covenant children!**
- **We are not training dogs or other show animals, but rather raising obedient disciples who must learn to follow the eyes of the Master as He leads them.**

This should be the goal of the instruction and discipleship that we give to those who come to Jesus later in life as well! This is the great truth that Jesus declared to the religious leaders when they challenged Him in Jerusalem at the Feast of Dedication:

“ 24 Then the Jews surrounded Him and said to Him, "How long do You keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly." 25 Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father's name, they bear witness of Me. 26 But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. 27 My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. 28 And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.”

- **David was a shepherd who heard the master’s voice and went on to be a great King in Israel: One who the Scriptures say was a man after God’s own heart.**

David learned to follow his Master’s eyes and to walk in His ways, sharing many of his contemplations in the Psalms we still have with us today.

- **I trust that they will be a blessing to us during this Advent season as we learn to see more of Jesus and what He has done for us.**

David concludes his meditations in Psalm 32 with sobering and encouraging words that remind us about the important decisions we must make in this life:

10 “Many sorrows shall be to the wicked; But he who trusts in Jehovah, mercy shall surround him. 11 Be glad in Jehovah and rejoice, you righteous; And shout for joy, all you upright in heart!”

We will have our opportunity this morning to ‘shout for joy’ as we are commissioned with the singing of Joy to the World based on Psalm 98. May it remind us just how important it is for us to keep Jesus at the center of all we do in this holiday season so that we may truly know the joy of the season!

- **Let us not be like the Priest Zacharias who could not believe that salvation had come even as he prayed for it in the Temple!**
- **Rather let us be those who truly do believe that Jesus came to save his people from their sins!**
- **Knowing that we have responded to Him while He is near and praying that many more will find Him!**

May we not pull back from being those beautiful feet that the Apostle Paul commands us to be...

Romans 10: “12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. 13 For “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” 14 How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? 15 And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!”

Communion Meditation: John 18:33

God apparently loves to surprise us with the unexpected—to throw us curve-balls—to make us look beyond the surface. People have many different expectations for a coming Messiah, but none expected what actually happened. The power and glory of God came through the backdoor where no one was looking. His presence startled us. St. Augustine of Hippo captures the paradox: Man’s maker was made man that He, Ruler of the stars, might nurse at His mother’s breast; that the Bread might hunger, the Fountain thirst, the Light sleep, the Way be tired on its journey; that Truth might be accused of false witnesses, the Teacher be beaten with whips, the Foundation be suspended on wood; that Strength might grow weak; that the Healer might be wounded; that Life might die.