Christmas Message (2021)

**THE TENDER MERCY OF OUR GOD**

Luke 1:67-79

Key Verse: 1:78-79

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

 Merry Christmas! During the last two years, the pandemic has been an unprecedented experience for all of us. More than 5 million people lost their lives globally, and more than 0.9 million Americans passed away. Our livelihood has changed drastically. But despite all these challenges, we cannot deny God’s many blessings. We indeed have a reason to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus the Messiah.

Zechariah’s song in today’s passage is often called “the Benedictus.” We might call it Zechariah’s Christmas carol. Before getting into Zechariah’s song of praise, we need a brief review of its context. Zechariah was a priest who served God and his people faithfully in one of the darkest times in Israel’s history. He and his wife were a godly couple who dearly loved God and obeyed the Lord’s command. Unfortunately, however, they remained childless until they became too old to have a child any longer. One day, the angel Gabriel appeared to him in the temple and announced that his wife Elizabeth would give birth to a son. Yet, instead of saying, *“Praise the Lord*!” Zechariah spoke unbelieving words by saying, *“How can I be sure of this? You know, my wife is old. I mean, really old!”* It offended the angel Gabriel, who told Zechariah that he would not be able to speak even a word until the child's birth.

However, the ten months of God’s divine discipline turned out to be the time of God’s revelation and awakening moment to him. When he named his son “**John**” according to the angel’s instruction, his mouth opened, and he began to praise the Lord.

Today’s passage records Zechariah’s song of praise. In his song of praise, Zecharaiah predicts the life and ministry of Jesus the Messiah (67-75) and his son John the Baptist (76-79). We particularly notice that Zechariah was not stuck with the past or the harsh realities of the present. Instead, he saw a prophetic vision, looking ahead to the bright future through the beautiful work of God’s redemption. In the song of praise, Jesus the Messiah is likened to a horn of salvation (69) and the rising sun (78), which illustrates the characteristics of God’s salvation. May we think about what Zechariah saw and prophesied about Jesus the Messiah this morning.

Look at verses 67-68. “His Father Zecharaiah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied; ‘Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.’” The phrase ***“he has come to his people***” means a lot. It is paraphrased in King James Version as “***He has visited his people.”*** But it means more than just a visit. It actually means that God became a man. Of course, Zechariah didn’t say that God became a man. But that’s what he meant. Wow! We wonder where Zechariah got this idea. Well, apparently, through the visit of Mary during the time of Elizabeth’s pregnancy a few months ago (1:39-45), Zechariah came to know that by the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary, who was a virgin, conceived a child who would be called “the Son of the Most High.” (1:32)

Zechariah was familiar with the word “Immanuel,” which means “God with us” based on Isaiah’s prophecy, “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”In fact, the word **“Immanuel”** means more than “God is with us.” It means that God became a man. It reminds us of John 1:14, which states, “The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

In his song of praise, Zechariah uses the two figures, a horn, and the rising sun. Look at verses 69-71. “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), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.” Generally, a horn symbolizes power and dignity. The horn of salvation refers to Jesus the Messiah. As a priest, Zechariah was aware of God’s promises in the Old Testament that a horn of salvation would come to this world as a descendant of King David. Now, that promise was fulfilled through the birth of Jesus as a descendant of David.

Look at verses 72 and 73. “To show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father, Abraham.” These verses explain more specifics surrounding God’s covenant of salvation. There are many covenants in the Bible. Yet, all of them come under two categories: the covenant of law and the covenant of promise (Gal. 4:21-31). What’s the difference? The efficacy of the covenant of the law depends on our performance. No one can be saved if salvation depends on our perfect performance. The covenant of promise depends on God’s faithfulness, and anyone can receive salvation based on faith. The ministry of Jesus the Messiah, which includes his suffering, sacrificial death, and resurrection, is the fulfillment of God’s covenant to Abraham, which leads us to salvation based on the grace of God.

We frequently use the word or term “salvation.” It’s hard to define the meaning of the word “Salvation.” If someone asks you, *“Are you saved?”* what will you say to them? What does it mean? Does it simply suggest that God will not punish you and you will go to heaven? Salvation is a broad term. In fact, all religions claim their kinds of salvation. So, what kind of salvation does Jesus bring to us? Read verses 74 and 75. “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.” We learn here that God’s salvation includes two steps: **1) rescue and 2) restoration.**

**First, Jesus rescues us from all our enemies: (74a)** Look at verse 74a again. “To rescue us from the hand of our enemies.” We notice that Zechariah repeats similar phrases in his song, like **“Salvation from our enemies”** (71a), **“from the hand of all who hates”** (71b), and **“rescue us from the hand of our enemies.”** (74a)

So, who are our enemies from whom Jesus save us? It’s hard to define who our true enemies are. Enemies are those who manipulate, take advantage of, deceive, destroy and abuse us. To the Jews in Zechariah’s time, the Romans were their political enemies. Growing up in Korea, I considered the Japanese who occupied and oppressed Korean people for 36 years were my enemies. I had some mean guys in junior high school who often bullied and made fun of me. I felt humiliated and angry. Has any of you been bullied or abused? Enemies are real. We sometimes think that our greatest enemy is ourselves. But we all have an ultimate enemy, the devil. 1 Peter 5:8 states, “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” Let me show you a video clip. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvI4QS6bkvQ&t=86s

In this video clip, the cub’s enemy is a hungry lioness, vicious and merciless. We are like the defenseless cub. So we all need a strong savior, like the mama bear. Jesus is the Might Savior who came to rescue us from the hand of all our enemies, including the power of sin and the devil. Jesus is the Mighty God who came to save us.

**Second, Jesus restores us (74b-75).** Look at verses 74b-75. “And to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.” God’s salvation through Jesus does not stop with a single act of rescuing us from our enemies. God’s salvation through Jesus is a lifelong process of healing and restoration. After the rescue, Jesus, our Savior, continues to restore us from our wounds and brokenness until we come wholesome and fully alive in him.

The devil, our archenemy, has many heads and horns, through which it impales us (Rev. 12:3). Once the devil’s horns stab or pierce us, we are critically wounded and traumatized. And we suffer from emotional, mental, relational, and physical pains. Traumatized people often suffer from fear or nightmares even long after they first experience trauma. Childhood trauma usually lasts a lifetime unless it is adequately treated and cured. Some people express their inner pains in anger, while others suffer from depression. We all need healing and restoration from wounds and brokenness.

Look at verses 74b-75 again. “and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.” However, we must remember that the healing and recovery of our wounded soul are not automatic. We need to exercise our faith in Jesus intentionally.

The phrase “without fear” seems worthy to think about. Why did Zechariah say, “serve him without fear”? Well, it’s because the opposite of faith is fear. In the Bible, we are encouraged to have godly fear. At the same time, God sent the Messiah so that we may no longer live in fear (Heb. 2:15). The proper caution of specific danger is necessary, normal, and healthy. Yet, there is an unhealthy fear that can be self-destructive. Fear and anxiety can be toxic to our souls and relationships with others.

So, how can we overcome unhealthy fear and anxiety? The first step is to identify them? Once we identify them, we should bring them to Jesus. Apostle Paul said in Philippians 4:6 and 7. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” The healing and recovery of our wounded and brokenness are not instant but lifelong processes requiring our attention and self-discipline. It’s the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in us.

In verses 76 and 77, Zechariah briefly mentions his son's ministry, John the Baptist. Read verses 76 and 77. “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, to give his people the knowledge of God’s salvation through the forgiveness of sins.” The primary task of John the Baptist is to help people prepare their minds and hearts to receive the grace of forgiveness of sins through repentance.

As Zechariah concludes his song of praise in verses 78 and 79, he compares the grace forgiveness of sins to the figure of the rising sun. Read verses 78 and 79. “Because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.” Here, Jesus, the Messiah, is likened to the rising sun, highlighting that salvation is the prime expression of God’s mercy toward broken people.

Unfortunately, my home in NY is westbound, so I cannot see the rising sun. But I can see the sun going down, still beautiful and melancholy. However, the tender mercy of our God is like the rising sun. When the sun rises slowly, the cold darkness begins to dissipate, the warm light of the sun spreads until it reaches every corner of the world. Like the rising sun, the tender mercy of our God is therapeutic, healing our wounded soul from inside out.

The phrase “because of the tender mercy” draws our attention. The word “mercy” means “compassion or forgiveness shown toward those who deserve punishment.” So, it would be acceptable to say, “because of the mercy of our God.” But Zechariah added the adjective “**tender”** to it, saying **“because of the tender mercy of our God.”** I wonder why.

 Well, it’s probably because wounded and broken people are extremely sensitive toward any threat or pressure. If they feel threatened or pressured, they immediately close their minds. Some people become emotionally shot down and defensive. Why? It’s because they don’t want to be hurt again. The only way these broken people can find healing is not through any form of threat or forceful pressure but the tender mercy of our God.

 Isaiah 42:2 & 3 also illustrates the characteristics of the ministry of the Messiah by saying, “He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.” Through the tender mercy of our God, so many wounded and broken people have been rescued and restored. I am one of them, and so are some of you.

 Let me close my sermon. We live in a brutal world where the law of the jungle is practiced mercilessly. It’s full of violence and injustice. We see many people wounded and broken. Where is our hope? Can we change the world? No. The tender mercy of our God is the true hope for all fallen humankind who live in darkness. The tender mercy of our God is the true power and authority that can save and heal people and guide them into the path of peace. Jesus said to the religious leaders of his time in Matthew 9:13, “But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

When is the last time you share tender mercy with others? After all, what kind of gift do you want for yourself this Christmas? What kind of gift do you like to share with your friends, and your loved ones, and others? May I suggest you a gift? What about God’s tender mercy with a box of dark chocolate? Jesus the Messiah is the best Christmas gift from heaven for each of us. If any of us has not accepted Jesus as your Savior, it’s time for you to invite him into your heart. Jesus said in Revelation 3:20, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.” If you have already accepted him as your Savior, it’s time for you to renew your faith in him and continue to abide in him. 2021 was one of the most challenging years for most of us. Many things are being changed. The future seems dark and unpredictable. But one thing we are sure of is that Jesus is the rising sun, mighty to save and full of compassion. We have nothing to fear, for Christ Jesus is with us now and forever. Merry Christmas!