

**December 5th, 2021**

**Year C; Second Advent**

**Baruch 5: 1-9**

**Canticle 16 The Song of Zechariah**

**Luke 3:1-6**

***Canticle 16 The Song of Zechariah*** (Luke 1: 68-79)

*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; \**

*he has come to his people and set them free.*

*He has raised up for us a mighty savior, \**

*born of the house of his servant David.*

*Through his holy prophets he promised of old,*

*that he would save us from our enemies, \**

*from the hands of all who hate us.*

*He promised to show mercy to our fathers \**

*and to remember his holy covenant.*

*This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham, \**

*to set us free from the hands of our enemies,*

*Free to worship him without fear, \**

*holy and righteous in his sight*

*all the days of our life.*

*You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, \**

*for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,*

*To give his people knowledge of salvation \**

*by the forgiveness of their sins.*

*In the tender compassion of our God \**

*the dawn from on high shall break upon us,*

*To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, \**

*and to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

*Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: \**

*as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.*

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

If I were in the pew today, on this second Sunday of Advent, I'd have some questions about these readings! Advent, this short season of looking towards the birth of the infant Jesus, this season of waiting and watching, features readings that often seem off the topic!

We open with a passage from Baruch, what is that?

Then instead of a psalm we have a Canticle, what is that?

And finally, the gospel is from Luke's third chapter, when Jesus is 30 years old, and his cousin John has begun preaching. What is WITH that??

A few notes to hopefully get us situated, then I'll get to preaching!

Baruch is a book in the Apocrypha, the group of books from the time between when the Old Testament was completed and before the New Testament began.

Baruch is widely thought to have been the scribe for the prophet Jeremiah. Baruch is thought to have been writing during the time when the Hebrew people were in exile in Babylon.

The passage we hear today echoes the Advent theme of repentance, asking forgiveness and mercy from God for our sins, and with owning our sins, our places we have fallen short. And that we too can be welcomed home, from exile, like the prodigal son or daughter.

In addition, the reading from Baruch quotes from the writings of the prophet Isaiah:

*For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low  
and the valleys filled up, to make level ground,  
so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.*

We will return to these familiar words when John the Baptist also quotes

them in our gospel.

But next we need to ask: what is a canticle?

A canticle is simply a hymn or chant that gets its words from a Biblical text. Our canticle today, The Song of Zechariah, brings us back into the Advent story. Zechariah is one of my favorite characters in the Biblical story.

Zechariah is a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem, and he and his wife Elizabeth, despite living pure and holy lives, have never been able to have a child. This is especially crushing for Elizabeth, as a woman's purpose and goal was to have many children. And she has failed. And now they are both old, really old.

So life is disappointing, but it goes on. And Zechariah must go to the Temple for his turn to burn the incense and offer the prayers in the center of the Temple, the holy of holies where only the priests could venture.

So, he goes to the Temple and while he is burning the incense at the altar, the angel Gabriel appears!

And Gabriel has come with the astounding news that, though Elizabeth is really old, she will become pregnant and have a child, a son!

And instead of being thrilled, Zechariah starts doubting the angel Gabriel, How can this be? We are way too old now! And for his limited and whiny reaction, Zechariah is made mute by Gabriel, and he will only be able to speak again when the baby is born, AND named John.

So, Elizabeth does become pregnant, and she has nine months of quiet at home, perhaps not missing all that whining and negativity from poor Zechariah.

Yes, poor Zechariah, who saw life as disappointing when so many others in his world did not have his blessings, of literacy, as a priest he could read, of some status and respect in the community as a priest, of a faithfully and

caring and patient wife, Elizabeth. All Zechariah could see was the frustrations, the disappointments.

So nine months pass, and the baby is born. And Elizabeth brings out the baby to meet the neighbors. And they start to ask: What will you name this dear baby boy, surely you will name him Zechariah after his father, after so many years of waiting for him.

But Elizabeth said: “No, he is to be called John.” And as is the way of neighbors at times, they started to argue with this wise old new mother: “But you don’t have any relatives named John!”

So next they get a tablet for Zechariah to offer his mute opinion, and he wrote: “His name is John.”

And at that moment Zechariah’s voice returns and he immediately begins to praise God, who has given him some quiet time to think, and to re-think, all he had assumed about his life.

And Zechariah praises God and then, holding the newborn baby in his arms, he begins to speak a prophecy about his son, John.

And the prophetic words Zechariah spoke are this canticle we have today: The Song of Zechariah.

And you can just see the scene, this old man, more alive than in years, holding this newborn boy, and singing out the joy of new life in his old age, new hope, new call.

In his prophecy, Zechariah foretells the arrival of a savior. And that this tiny baby, who he calls, “You, my child,” will be a prophet and will come before the savior and prepare the way for him. He says to the newborn baby: You will call us all to return to God, to own all those things confession calls to mind: “...our sins, known and unknown, things done and left undone...”

Oh, so many ways we have fallen short, our voices too quick to anger, our spirits too eager to hate, too casual with calling names and too easily

dehumanizing our opponents and our enemies.

And Zechariah assures you and me that with our confession, with owning our faults, and letting them go:

*In the tender compassion of our God \*  
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,  
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, \*  
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

Zechariah, holding his tiny son, prophesying, his face no longer closed with the disappointments of life, but open and alive with a life he could not have imagined. And once he starts to speak, he cannot stop!

Finally, in our gospel lesson, we find that newborn baby, John, now grown up, and emerging from perhaps not the easiest life in the wilderness. Not a cushy life and very often misunderstood or persecuted for speaking the truth. But he is called to walk before the Savior, to prepare the road for his cousin Jesus. And to call the people, to call us to confession and forgiveness.

And John quotes the prophet Isaiah, who the prophet Baruch quoted in our first reading:

*"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.  
Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;  
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"*

Phew! A lot of threads woven between these readings, and all of them drawing together and echoing over the eons to us, calling us too to let go of

our disappointments, to let go of the moments that shame us most, the memories that make us shudder, to own and let go of our sins, our human failings, to repent and return to the Lord.

As I said, I love Zechariah, and can imagine his voice after nine months of angel-imposed silence, after much time to think, much time to be quiet with God.

When his voice returns, Zechariah cannot help speaking, and speaking and speaking! The words flow forth.

His reaction to the return of his voice, realizing the blessing of his voice, reminds me of a favorite hymn of Tim's and mine:

*"How Can I Keep from Singing?"*

The chorus of this dear old song goes:

*No storm can shake my inmost calm  
while to that Rock I'm clinging.  
Since love is Lord of heav'n and earth,  
how can I keep from singing?*

May this short and beautiful season of Advent raise our voices for love, and not hate. May we treasure our voices as gifts from our God and use them, like old Zechariah, to remind others that:

*Since love is Lord of heav'n and earth,  
how can I keep from singing?*

Amen.

