

OVERFLOWING LOVE

Luke 1:67-79

Intro

The words that we are to hear this morning are credited to an individual who had not spoken in over nine months. As you would expect, if you've been silent for that long, then you're probably going to have a whole lot to say, and he does. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he lifts a song of prophesy that recounts the glory of God and how God has chosen to work through both his child, and his yet to be born nephew.

Just in case you're wondering, these two children turn out to be John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth.

However, if we only read this passage we miss all of the fun stuff that happened earlier so as to cause him to be unable to speak in the first place.

So, here's the background!

The Gospel of Luke, once you get past the preface, begins with the introduction of Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. He was a priest of the Lord, born in the priestly order of Abijah, while she was from the family line of Aaron (the brother of Moses), another priestly lineage. They were righteous but had not had any children and, as the scripture so delicately puts it, they were "both getting on in years."

It is while Zechariah was serving in his priestly occupation, offering incense to the Lord, that the angel Gabriel visits him and announces that he and his wife are going to be blessed with a child whom they will name John. There is the angelic declaration that John "will be great in the sight of the Lord" and have "the spirit and power of Elijah [to] go before him, [so as to] turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah doubts that this is possible, and says as much: "how will I know that this so?" Gabriel does not take kindly to this doubt and Zechariah is stricken mute, unable to speak until the day that all of this occurs.

Zechariah goes home and what the angel has proclaimed, as you would expect, begins to happen. Elizabeth conceives and then has a child. It is on the eighth day of this young-uns life that the traditional naming ceremony takes place. There was a whole lot of family and societal pressure to name the child after his father, but Elizabeth protests saying that the child should be named John. We aren't told how *she* knows this, but she stands firmly behind it.

The relatives won't give up and go over to the now-silent-for-nine-months Zechariah, to try and figure out his opinion. He took a writing tablet and wrote on it, "His name is John." (Isn't it amazing how a visit from an angel and then being mute for nine months help to clear up any lingering doubts?) As soon as he wrote this down his tongue was freed and he began to speak. What we are about to hear is some of that monologue of praise and prophesy that relates in general to the individual who will ultimately bring about the act of salvation, and then in specific to his son and all that God will do through him. There is no doubt. There is no wavering. Just the love of God flowing forth in such a way that it cannot, it will not be contained. The scripture reads this way.

Luke 1:67-79

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: ⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

“Overflowing Love”

One of the reoccurring themes that shows up in any interpretation of scripture is that people continue to not get what it means to follow God, or at the very least, fall back into the patterns of the world that they have become familiar and comfortable with, even if there is an underlying appreciation of the fact that what they are going back to is not a healthy alternative. From the actions of Abram (how many times did he say that Sarai was his sister? Clearly that isn't working!), to the Israelites (what do you mean you want to go back to Egypt?), to Peter (the rock on which the church is going to be built is immediately told, 'get behind me Satan' when he rejects the journey to the cross that Jesus had just told him he is going to have to take), even the individuals that we think of as the paragons of what it means to be faithful, or at the very least blessed provide us example after example of being bound to the world in ways that stand in opposition to the will of God.

Can you imagine if that was what the church would feel like if that was where the story ended?

Exactly: not the most fulfilling of places.

But it is so far from the end of the story.

Instead, with every story of people turning away from God, we have example after example of God showing and saying, 'I love you so much that I will pull you out of the pits that you have been thrown into, as well as the pits you have dug for yourself. I love you so much that I will show you how we were meant to live with one another. I love you so much that despite all of the times that you turn away, I will continue to remain faithful: I will hold you accountable, but that accountability shows just how much I long for us to be in relationship where all promises are kept. I love you so much that I will make all things new. I will always love you.'

So often we hear that idea of love that is forever in song, film, or the written word and it either gets schmoltzified into something that is sweet to the point that it doesn't feel like real life, or confused as something physical.

But is that love? Is that really love? Is that what God is working to create and share with us? With one another?

As I look at the world, the answer that I keep coming back to is no. As I look at scripture, the answer is no. As I look at this passage, the answer is no. Listen again to how Zechariah concludes the reading that we have from him: “the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

That’s not sticky sweet. That’s not something that is confined to the trapping of this physical form that we have been blessed with.

No, that is a sort of love that overflows, that seeps in through even the most reinforced corners of our heavily protected selves because it just keeps coming, just keeps reappearing, just keeps reminding us that we are that precious, that no matter what pitfalls we may hit or self-inflicted wounds we may create, that the love is still there... even when it seems impossible.

The following was sent to me (and a whole lot of others) regarding a family that we have been praying for, for quite some time. It is written by a husband regarding the realities that his wife and his family are facing due to the cancer that his wife has been fighting. He wrote, ‘The lens of suffering and death through which [we now] peer at the world has lent some clarity to the things that really matter and reveals in stark relief the things that truly don't. We pray that the things toward which we together commit our time and energies are things that matter--things that offer life and dignity and freedom for those for whom it is fleeting.’

‘Things that matter’: as you hear that, what sort of actions, what sort of relationships do you feel this husband is speaking about?

And again, this is written by a husband whose wife is battling cancer, and having so many days when it feels like they are losing. Things that matter. What do those things that matter show? Love. To and for each other. To and for their family. To and for the world that they are still a part of. But love, even through the very real prism of earthly death.

Where does that come from?

“The tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

This husband is writing from a place of suffering and even death...and even there the love of God continues to lean in to their lives, and in their case, they are able to recognize it...even just a little bit.

Zechariah believed in God.

But, initially, he couldn’t believe that God’s love would work in such a way that a child would be born, let alone that the child who would be born would prepare the way for the One that was foretold of.

But God’s love overflowed in such a way that it came to pass. I believe that is one of the reasons why Zechariah’s first words after his elongated silence are focused where they are. He has been reminded in a very large way, that you cannot stop God’s love. You may be able to hold it at bay ...for a while, but you cannot stop it.

Will you believe that for yourself? Will you believe that God's love is so great that it is, in God's time, able to heal you of all that ails you? Do you believe that God's love will be there for you no matter what, seeping in longing to be welcomed in in totality? Will you believe in that love for yourself?

It's there!

It's here!

The stories of God's love are everywhere; in God's Word; in the lives of others; in our own lives. Will we trust that this love is there for us for all time and in all circumstances? Believe in God's overflowing love in your life.

After Sermon Prayer

God, Your love is on display if we are willing to acknowledge it. Help us to see it and see it in our own lives. You have a passion for us that will never be squelched. Grant us the faith through Your Spirit to believe in that truth and trust in what it is able to bring. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.