**GOD HAS COME TO REDEEM HIS PEOPLE**

Luke 1:57-80

Key Verse 1:68

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.”

Let’s pray.  Heavenly Father, thank you for Jesus who came to us as a baby born in a manger.  Thank you for Jesus who came and opened our eyes to see God and his kingdom.  Thank you for Jesus our Savior who came to give peace to all men.  Thank you for Jesus who came to give us hope and vision and to restore dignity to our lives and makes us the children of God.  Praise Jesus the Immanuel God who came to be with us.   Amen.

Last Sunday, Pastor Strageland, a seasoned speaker and a servant of God, graciously accepted our invitation to deliver the message at our Thanksgiving Sunday worship service.  In his message, we learned that to sit at the left or right of Jesus’ throne is not for him to grant.  These places, according to Jesus, belong to those for whom they have been prepared.  Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.  For even the son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” I thank God for Pastor Strageland, who has served the gospel for sixty-one years and is still not yet ready to retire.  May God continue to bless Pastor Strageland to serve the people of this generation with the word of God.  Amen.

Well, Christmas is just around the corner. For Christians, Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year, and for a good reason.  Christmas is the dawn of God’s salvation plan.  The memories of Christmas as a youngster and even as an adult make it the happiest season of all time for me.  When I was younger, we would go caroling from house to house in our neighborhood during Christmastime.  If we sang well, they would give us ten cents.  If we sang out of tune, they would say, “Sorry, come back next time.”  The money we received was not much. Nevertheless, this was the happiest time to me as a kid.  The joy brought by Christmas is surely unforgettable.  But today, when you look around and see what is going on, it’s not easy to be happy.  In Africa, children and women are being kidnapped.  In the Middle East, Americans are being beheaded.  Bombs are exploding, killing people everywhere. There are no words that can comfort those who have lost loved ones in such tragedies.  When someone is killed or murdered, the ones who suffer most are those who are left behind. Last year, the Philippines was hit by a powerful typhoon, and the relatives of those who perished during the storm are still grieving. The bodies of many who died were never found.  It will take a significant amount of time to recover from the shock and grief.  Some may not be able to recover at all.

At times like this, people seem lost and ask, “Where is God in all this?”  This is a difficult question, and there is no easy or simple answer. But there is something we can do.  We can pray and read our Bibles to find some comfort and godly counsel.  These kinds of tragedies occurred even during Christ’s time.  Remember the time when king Herod ordered the massacre of innocent baby boys who were two years and under?  People must have wondered and asked the same question: “Where is God?”  Did He turn his face from his suffering children?  This surely was a difficult and depressing time.   But Luke  believed that in spite of the world’s horrible reality, God was working mightily for the salvation of his people.

Our story begins in Judea where a small group of people were sharing in the joy of the birth of Zechariah and Elizabeth‘s child.  Zechariah and Elizabeth were upright in the sight of God, but they were old and childless.  One day, when Zechariah was serving his priestly duties at the temple, Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, appeared to him and announced that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son in her old age. This news was too good for Zechariah to believe.  For years, Zechariah and his wife prayed for a child. The angel’s news was so unbelievable Zechariah forgot the Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth, could give them a son.  So instead of giving thanks, he said, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”  For this, Gabriel cursed Zechariah with muteness until his wife delivered the child.  For ten months, Zechariah received God’s discipline for his unbelief.  As soon as he named the child John according to the angel’s instructions, his mouth was opened, and he began to praise God.  Everyone who heard this was amazed, asking, “What then is this child going to be?”

Look at verse 68.  “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has  redeemed his people.”  Zechariah was extremely happy about the birth of his child, and at the same time he was also aware that the birth of the prophesied Messiah was about to be fulfilled.   He knew this because Mary had visited and stayed with his wife Elizabeth for three months. Surely Zechariah was extremely happy and wanted to praise God for giving him a son.  But when he thought about the imminent birth of the Messiah, he could no longer talk about his son. As soon as his mouth was opened, he praised God for the Messiah's coming by saying, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.”  Zechariah prophesied that the God of Israel had come as the Messiah of the world.  God humbly came to us when we could not go to him. He came to suffer together with us.  He came to serve us.  Surely God came to us in our desperate need.  He came to plant the hope of eternal life.  To restore love to broken lives.  Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah burst into a song of praise.  By praising God this way, Zechariah was actually singing, "Joy to the world! The Lord is come. Let earth receive her king.”  In his song, Zechariah described the characteristics and work of the Messiah.

Let’s read verses 69 and 70.  “He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through the holy prophets of long ago) ...”  A horn is a symbol of power and strength.  The coming Messiah is very powerful.  He can rescue us and protect us from our enemies, and through him we are victorious.  We often say, ”Jesus is the victory,” but what does that mean to us?

Why don’t we, as Christians, experience victory all the time?  Perhaps the problem is we don’t know who our true enemies are.  If we cannot identify our enemies, we cannot win the battle.  It’s like a boxer throwing punches in the dark.  Because of this, we often fight against the wrong people.  Sometimes we end up fighting against our loved ones like our spouses, family, friends, and coworkers.  Even if we win this fight, what will we gain?  Here we see that we are not to fight against our human enemies because our common, ultimate enemy is the Devil.  In Ephesians 6:12, the apostle Paul said, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the power of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

As Christians, we are aware that our enemy is the Devil.  Yet, because of pride, selfishness and worldly ambition, we are tempted to fight against flesh and blood. As I said, we end up fighting against the wrong people and the wrong objects.  We end up defeated in our spiritual battles even though Jesus still is mighty to save.  So our struggle as believers in Christ should be to remain in Jesus no matter what.  We cannot win against the Devil with our own ability.  That’s why Jesus said to his disciples in John 15:5 that they should remain in him and apart from him they could do nothing.  This mighty Jesus not only protects us from our enemies but also enables us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Look at verses 69-70.  It says that Jesus is the horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.  God promised king David that one of his descendants would be a horn of salvation.  King David himself said in Psalm 18:2, “The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”  God’s promise to David was fulfilled through the coming of Jesus.

God’s idea of salvation was not by works but by God’s grace from the beginning.  God did not just sit on his throne waiting to see what happened to us.  He initiated his salvation and has been carrying it out and will continue to do it to the end.  Some people complain about working five days a week.  I often hear them say, "I need a vacation." But our God works very hard to watch over us and work for our salvation.  Psalm 121:3, 4 reads, “He will not let your foot slip – He who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, He is truly dependable.

Verse 72 reads, “To show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant.”  We need God’s mercy more than anything else.  In verses 76, 77, Zechariah continues his song of praise and says, “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 salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.”  We notice that in his song, Zechariah did not say much about his son’s ministry.  Instead, he mainly talks about the Messiah because he knew that his son’s ministry was to prepare for the ministry of the Messiah by providing the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sin.

People say that knowledge is power.  However, there are various kinds of knowledge.  These days many people think that knowing how to make lots of money is the most powerful and valuable type of knowledge.  But that knowledge can not save our souls.  The knowledge of salvation is the most needed and the most valuable type of knowledge. We need to pay attention to the phrase “knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins.”  Salvation is a gift from God through the forgiveness of sins.

Christmas is approaching and some of us are worried about gifts.  We usually run out of ideas about what to give. In this passage, I realized that Christmas is not just about giving material things. Christmas is also about sharing spiritual things.  So instead of giving socks, neckties or t-shirts, why not the gift of friendship to someone.  How about visiting a nursing home and offering the gift of prayer for the elderly?  And according to verse 77, forgiveness is the best gift one can receive or give, because if you forgive others, you will be happy and empowered by God.  Ephesians 4:31, 32 reads, “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.  Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” God forgave all our sins, big and small, new and old.  This Christmas let’s exchange the gift of forgiveness with one another.

As good as it may sound, forgiving is easier said than done.  Some people hoard others' faults in their memory.  They often use them as weapons.  On the other hand, some people who are sensitive and have been deeply hurt by others often find it very hard to forgive those who hurt them. They may want to forgive but they can’t because they are not ready.  Gandhi once said, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong."  I think we can agree with this wise saying.  But what can the weak do then?  They should come to God.  They need to abide in Jesus' grace until they are healed in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and become strong enough to forgive others.

Our God is full of mercy and does not reject those who are weak.  We are all here only because of God’s grace and mercy.  Look at verses 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.” In these verses, Zechariah referred to Jesus as the rising sun. The tender mercy of our God is like the warmth and light of the rising sun.  Before Jesus came, all people in this world were living in darkness.  We had no hope.  We had no life.  In darkness, we despaired and only struggled to survive in this hopeless and perishing world.  But when Jesus came, he brought life into our hearts. There is a hymn written by Philip P. Bliss which says, “The whole world was lost in the darkness of sin; The light of the world is Jesus.” Our Lord Jesus is indeed the rising sun that will guide our path with his light all the way to the kingdom of God.  Jesus Christ is the rising sun that shines into our souls and dispels the darkness in our hearts.  When the rising sun Jesus shines on us, we are comforted, healed and enlightened.

Our almighty God is faithful and merciful.  He is not dead.  He is living. He is present with us through the grace of forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit.  Life is full of challenges.  More than ever, we need Jesus every day.  We need God’s mercy.  Jesus, the horn of salvation and the rising sun, is the hope of all people who live in the shadow of death because in his great mercy he died on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead.  He will come again to complete God’s great redemption, the resurrection of our bodies.  We all long for his second coming because in Christ, we have the wonderful hope of glorious resurrection and eternal life.  We still don’t understand many things.  But we trust in God who is almighty, faithful and merciful.  Praise be to the Lord the God of Israel because he has come to redeemed us.

This Christmas let’s share the grace of God with each other.  Our God is a gracious God.  In the kingdom of God, Jesus left his throne and came to this world to suffer and die for the debt we cannot pay.   On the cross, Jesus said to the criminal dying with him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”  Our Lord Jesus is gracious whether on his throne or dying on the cross.  Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you for Jesus, my rock and horn of salvation, who came to redeemed his people.  This Christmas, empower us with your Holy Spirit to sing a song of praise to our Lord Jesus, the rising sun, to shine in the hearts of all living in darkness.  Amen.