

Carol Service 2022

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Preacher: Martin Ayers

- [0 : 0 0] When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.
- On the eighth day, they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father, Zechariah. But his mother spoke up and said, No, he is to be called John.
- They said to her, There is no one among your relatives who has that name. Then they made signs to his father to find out what he would like him to be named.
- He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment, he wrote, His name is John. Immediately his mouth was opened, and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God.
- All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea, people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, What then is this child going to be?
- [1 : 0 7] For the Lord's hand was with him. His father, Zechariah, 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.
- 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 those who hate us.
- To show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham, 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.
- 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, because 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.
- And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel. In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.
- [2 : 3 3] This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria, and everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth to Galilee, to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.
- He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.
- She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for them. Thanks, Toby, for reading.

Thanks to all our readers. Thanks to our wonderful choir. My name is Martin Ayres, if we've not met. I'm the lead pastor here. And we're just going to think together for a few minutes about the reading that we just had that's printed on the sheets inside the song sheets we were given.

But let's just ask for God's help as we turn to reflect on his word. Let's pray together. With the poor and mean and lowly, lived on earth, our Savior, holy.

[3 : 50] Gracious God and loving Heavenly Father, thank you for this opportunity opportunity to reflect now on your gift to us of Jesus. We ask that by your promised spirit here with us, you will give us ears to hear your voice, minds that are open to your truth, and hearts willing to respond with appropriate wonder to this news.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, brilliant. After two years of pandemic times, Christmas is finally back to a more normal kind of build-up.

And one way you can enjoy the anticipation of Christmas is through a novelty Advent calendar. I don't know if you have one in your home. Cheese Advent calendars and coffee Advent calendars are now quite mainstream.

But this year, you could get the selfie Advent calendar, which gives you a new item to dress yourself with every day so that you can count down the number of selfies left until Christmas.

Or you can get this year the retro radio Advent calendar that gives you a different electronic part every day. And when you put them together, you gradually assemble your own radio.

[5 : 05] And one of the best Advent calendars that I've seen is the Gramophone Musical Advent calendar, which starts with a record player and then every day you get a new vinyl record with a Christmas song on to help you in the build-up to Christmas.

That's one of the great things about Christmas, is the build-up. And all this anticipation is hugely appropriate today because the first Christmas had been very long anticipated.

You can see that from the words we just had read for us. They're actually from a Christmas song, but a song from the first Christmas. They were the words written by the priest, Zechariah, who we've been hearing about in our reading.

He served in the temple in Jerusalem. He was a priest. And he spoke these words at the birth of his son, John the Baptist. All his neighbors and relatives were there for the celebration of the birth.

In fact, lots more people were there because news had spread through the whole region because Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife, was far too old to be able to bear a son.

[6 : 14] But the angel Gabriel visited Zechariah six months before he visited Mary. And Gabriel told Zechariah that he and Elizabeth would have a son with a very special mission.

Their child, John, was going to prepare people for the coming of another baby who would soon arrive, who would be the Lord himself, God, coming into the world.

That's how we get to this scene which must have been absolutely extraordinary because Zechariah is there standing in front of these friends and neighbors and family giving a speech at the party to celebrate the birth of his baby and he says almost nothing about his own child.

I don't know if you noticed that. Just have a look again at the reading. So he talks about his own baby at verse 76 the numbers just to mark the sentences and at the bottom there he turns to his own child verse 76 and says the first thing about his own son and even that is actually about the other baby.

He 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. Everything else that he says is about the other baby to come about Jesus.

[7 : 38] And that's because he knows that Jesus is going to change everything. So why will Jesus change everything? Well we're going to notice three things from Zechariah's song and the first thing is that Jesus gives us confidence.

Confidence in place of uncertainty. One of the key themes in Zechariah's song is that God has kept his promises in sending Jesus. Just notice that with me.

If you look at number 69 verse 69 he says of God 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.

Well the David being mentioned there was king of God's people a thousand years earlier and God had sent messengers or prophets at that time to say incredibly that there would be a king who would come in the line of David who would reign over God's kingdom forever and now in the coming of Jesus that promise is being fulfilled and promises that go back even further a further thousand years so let's continue to verse 72 where Zechariah says that God will show mercy in sending Jesus show mercy to our ancestors and remember his holy covenant the oath he swore to our father Abraham to rescue us from the hand of our enemies well that takes us back 4,000 years from where we are today to Abraham whose life story we find in the first book of the Bible Genesis God promised that one day he would put the whole world right and he would do that through a descendant of Abraham and this child of

Abraham this seed of Abraham this one man through him people from every nation will be able to come to know God and enjoy the blessing of relationship with God God said I will be their God and they will be my people all through this one man and generation after generation has gone by since that promise to Abraham and people like this man Zechariah have been born and lived and spent their lives hanging on to those promises and they've faced hard times at times it had been brutal and you can imagine them asking themselves as people were born and lived and died are those promises real will this promised king in the line of David ever really come just as we might ask today is there really any hope of a better world and then Jesus comes and Zechariah can see that the answer to those questions is yes God is there and he is keeping his promises so the world has been waiting for that first

[10 : 30] Christmas not just the 24 days of an advent calendar but 2000 years and for people like us hearing this tonight we can look back at those prophecies and they give us confidence they were like sign posts as we read now what was written before Jesus came and we see prophecies that were fulfilled by him with astonishing accuracy and they give reassurance for us that this is nothing random that a man would come claiming to be God and showing people that he was God for it was the culmination of a plan through centuries so that we wouldn't miss it it gives us confidence that God is really there that these things could happen fulfilling generations of promise and that's great news the atheist David Baddiel has written a new book called The God Desire and he recently said speaking about his book I wish there was a God I'm desperate for that comfort well in

Jesus coming God has shown us that he is really there and not just that he's there but he's faithful we all know the Christmas song that tells us of the pain of someone not keeping their promises last Christmas I gave you my heart and the very next day we all know what happened well the message of Jesus coming is that you can put your trust in God because he is faithful he's a promise keeper so confidence the second thing that means Jesus changes everything is he gives us hope hope in place of darkness Zechariah tells us why Jesus is coming in verse 78 we just have a look at the top of the next page he says he comes 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 so Christmas is light in the darkness we love lights at Christmas don't we some houses go wild with

Christmas lights maybe your house has gone wild and Jesus is described here by Zechariah as like the rising sun shining to break the darkness it says we live in darkness because we live in the shadow of death and for lots of us the hardest thing about Christmas is the way that death casts a shadow over it it casts a shadow over our news the four children who fell through the ice in the lake in Solihull last week and perished or the migrants who perished crossing the channel just last week and death casts a shadow over so many of our homes there'll be the empty chair the empty bed the person who is missing now who would always have been part of Christmas and who we know we'll never get back well Zechariah makes this extraordinary claim in verse 70 that Jesus has come as light to cast that darkness away the same God who kept his promises in sending Jesus has made promises for the future that one day he will put the whole world right and there'll be no more death and no more mourning or crying or pain so how do we know that Jesus has the power to keep those promises and give us hope well we need to move beyond the birth of

Jesus for it was as people spent time with the man Jesus that they caught a glimpse in human history of the world that we all want one day a man Jairus comes running to Jesus and he falls on his knees before him and he begs him he says my little daughter is sick would you come to my home and heal her and Jesus says he will go and they set off for Jairus' house but on the way some servants come out to meet them from Jairus' home and they say to Jairus don't bother the teacher anymore your daughter is dead and Jesus turns to Jairus and he says don't be afraid just believe they head to Jairus' home and there's people outside wailing with grief and Jesus takes the parents in with him and three followers Peter James and John and they go in and they go into the little girl's room where the dead girl lies and Jesus takes her hand her lifeless hand in his hands and he says to her little girl

I say to you get up and she gets up he pulls her out of death like we would wake a child from sleep and he gives her back to her parents and the disciples who were there realize at last here is a man you can trust to take away the sting of death one who for any of us can take your hand and lead you through death and out of the other side into life forever and we're all looking for hope this Christmas aren't we I've got a friend who I used to always ask about the news and he said to me I've stopped watching the news and listening to the news it's too depressing for me now well here is hope that won't disappoint you when dawn breaks and the sun shines it takes the darkness away and Zechariah is saying Jesus can do that forever for anyone who trusts him he gives us confidence he gives us hope and thirdly Zechariah says Jesus changes everything because he brings peace that's our third thing he brings peace peace in the place of fear we see the fear in verse 74 if you just look back up at what

[16:24] Zechariah says verse 74 he says that he's come 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 Jesus rescues us for the purpose that we were made for to have a relationship with God and to live serving him pleasing him he gives meaning to our life but it talks there about Jesus coming so that we can serve God without fear and one thing that we should fear is how we compare to God's standards of holiness and righteousness there's an old Christmas movie called The Water Babies it's all about a boy called Tom and Tom is an orphan and he works as a chimney sweep for a crook called Mr. Grimes and one day Tom is up on the roof of a beautiful stately home having gone up the chimney and he gets lost and he forgets which chimney he came up and he goes down the wrong chimney and he comes out into a fireplace in a beautiful pristine white bedroom and he steps out of the fireplace and everything in the room is clean and white and there's this pristine little girl in the room asleep in her four poster bed and he looks around the room

Tom and he says paradise paradise this is my idea of paradise and Tom walks over the white carpet and he looks for the first time in his life into a mirror a full length mirror so he sees himself for the first time in his life and he's absolutely covered in soot and he's overwhelmed by his dirt on his face on his dirty raggy clothes he's left black sooty footprints wherever he stepped and he's standing in this perfectly clean white room and the girl could wake up any moment well when we come to see what God is like in the person of Jesus each of us should have that kind of feeling that we're standing in the presence of sheer goodness of blazing purity and we can't hide and we can't get clean that's the fear but wonderfully the great mission

Jesus has come on is to make us clean look with me at verse 77 at the top of the next page Jesus comes verse 77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins how can he do that how can he forgive us and make us clean well he could only do that by becoming one of us so we get the striking language about God right at the very start of Zechariah's song that he said in verse 68 praise be to the Lord the God of Israel because he has come to his people and redeemed them Christmas is God come to be with us to rescue us so that we can be welcomed by him with nothing to fear this year's John Lewis Christmas advert is a bit different to normal it's called the beginner and it shows a man learning to skateboard

I don't know if you've seen it lots of people are seeing it every time they watch a YouTube video as the advert this guy is learning to skateboard and he keeps falling off and he's got cuts and bruises but he's obsessed with learning to skate you see him at work sat at his desk but he's watching videos about how to skateboard and he's got a skateboard under his feet under the desk and day after day it goes on and you're wondering as you watch the advert why is he doing this and then at the end of the advert he's in the kitchen with his wife and the doorbell rings and they go to the door and there's a social worker at the door with a girl called Ellie and you realize and you realize and you realize that the couple are welcoming her for fostering or adoption into their home and Ellie is clutching a skateboard and she looks scared but then she sees his skateboard in the hall and he says I skate a bit too and a look of fear turns to a smile and she walks in and you realize all his cuts and bruises were him becoming like Ellie because that's what Ellie needed so that she wouldn't be afraid to be with him and she could be welcome and I don't see what the

John Lewis advert has got to do with John Lewis but they've captured something that lies right at the heart of Christmas that Zechariah's message to us about Jesus is God has become one of us so that he can welcome us Jesus humble beginnings lying in an animal feeding trough they set a pattern for Jesus life in fact when you look at the manger and you see Jesus it's a bit like looking at a man falling he's come down to earth from heaven but he's in freefall and he has much further to go to rescue us he'll have to allow himself to be betrayed and killed on a cross where he will cry out abandoned by God my God my God why have you forsaken me as he separated so that we can be accepted and rescued and forgiven and brought home to God the soundtrack to that John Lewis advert is a song called all the small things and just as the doorbell rings and Ellie is at the door it has the line carry me home and Jesus came to us at

[22 : 27] Christmas and became one of us so that he could bring us home to him and it's wonderful it means at the very end of Zechariah's song he says in verse 79 to guide our feet into the path of peace that's true peace the peace that our hearts were made for and long for and God offers each one of us the gift of peace this Christmas that comes from a right relationship with him it's peace that comes to you if you turn to God because you receive from him the gift of confidence the gift of hope the gift of forgiveness like all gifts we have to respond we have to receive that gift from him so I want to urge you with everything I've got to find out more about how you might respond rightly to that great gift from God Simon's going to say a bit more at the end about how you could do that you could come back here to

St Silas and join us for back to church Sunday on the 8th of January Zechariah sees that Jesus changes everything he brings us confidence in place of uncertainty hope that drives out the darkness and peace instead of fear Amen we're going to sing in response to that we've got one more carol it's a belter of a carol so the choir are going to come up and Matthew and the choir will lead us that for the to you think Thank you.