

## WELCOME 6<sup>th</sup> December 2020 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent '20 B

Luke 1:5-25 & 67-75

Welcome again this morning! I'm glad you're here. I pray you experience God's grace in abundance in this brief time together. Please check our website for our weekly Zoom Bible Study times & other important information & updates.

We're continuing w/ our adapted worship...so there are Group Study & Discussion resources right there in your hands. *Special welcome to those who are with us online. Please make your way through the songs & material we've linked so that you experience @ home what we experiencing here. We want to equip you so God leads you into the fullness of His word & his work in your lives & then out into the city to share what God has done for you.* Remember what we need to do to keep each other as safe as we can... Hand sanitizer. Masks. Sign in. Distance. Offering. Communion. Thanks to our set-up/clean-up folks!

**As we move into this week...**Don't make promises you can't keep. That was my dad's way of reminding me that if my hands weren't moving my lips should be still. He knew what was at times true about him was at times true about all of us...We make promises & don't keep them. We give assurances & don't follow through. We say we will & don't. We have good intentions...Not just among politicians is talk cheap or promises made to be broken. I won't ask for confessions today, I know me...I know So for many; the nearly 9000 promises we can count in the Bible are just like ours: words...intentions...assurances that may or may not have any long term impact influence or implication...And when the going gets tough or results are long in coming... it's easy to feel like those promises are forgotten - abandoned or were never true at all...

*Then Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit & gave this prophecy:*

*"Praise the Lord, the God of Israel,  
because he has visited & redeemed his people.  
He has sent us a mighty Saviour  
from the royal line of his servant David,  
just as he promised through his holy prophets long ago.*

Christmas is more than a promise...It is God staking his life on our eternity. Christmas is God w/ skin in the game for our salvation. Christmas is the new reality of an enduring relationship w/ the Father – a relationship of love, provision & care. Christmas is the assurance that even when the final fulfillment is yet unseen; we have God's word, his eternal character, that his promises are kept forever.

We'll explore & experience together that Christmas is more.

Let's pray...then we'll get stuck into it.

## **PRAYER OF THE DAY:**

*Holy God, We long for your joy to fill us. We trust in your promise to forgive & heal our sinful hearts. We hear your call to turn toward you, to allow your power to change our lives for your purposes in this world.*

*Meet us here & fill us with your wisdom. Conquer our hearts with your joy. Take hold of us by your presence & your Word so we live worthy of him who made us yours; Jesus Christ alone Lord & Saviour. In His Name we pray...Amen*

Let's sing & then we'll hear God's Word...

## **FAITH CHAT:**

1. What would be for you an ideal Christmas?
2. You just received some good news. Who do you tell first?

**BIBLES**

## 2 Advent '20 B – CHRISTMAS IS MORE THAN...A PROMISE

The Philadelphia Eagles are a US football team. That's their team helmet logo. I read a story about a guy named Jeff Riegel. He had season tickets to their home football games for 30 years. When the Eagles played in Philadelphia. He was there...for 30 yrs. During that time, the Eagles never won a Super Bowl (Grand Final) Never made it to the playoffs. Never won their division. 30 yrs...long time to be an Eagles fan. When he was nearing the end of his life he wrote a letter to the Eagles' mgmt asking if he could have 6 players serve as pall bearers. He wanted to give the team 1 final chance...to let him down. *You know that was funny...* But it isn't funny to be let down

We know what it's like to be let down...maybe not by a sports team but certainly by a friend or family member, an organization or institution or gov't. We know what it's like for someone to break a promise...to abandon a commitment...to go back on their word...to do what they swore they wouldn't or not do what they said they would. Children often grow to learn that when a parent says, "We'll see" or "Maybe" in *their* house, it means "no." And "I'll try" means "Don't count on it."

I don't know how old Zech & Liz are...but I'm guessing they've put "have children" in the "not-in-this-lifetime" basket. That season is over & as faithful as they have been & as diligently as you know they have prayed for a child...at some point they feel let down...by God maybe by each other by their circumstances by the sidelong glances & pity of the folks around them. I don't know what they feel about God in their hearts but I've had plenty of folks tell me in over 30 years of ministry...sometimes you ask God for 1 thing...just 1...& when that 1 thing doesn't come...you really struggle to keep faith alive or hope or joy or anything really...maybe they're there?

They're not the only ones...As Zech stands at the altar praying for God's people...For centuries those for whom he prays have languished under the depressing thought that maybe God has <sup>w/</sup>drawn from them like when they were conquered by Babylon. Ezekiel records his vision in Ez 10 & 11 of God's glory departing 1<sup>st</sup> from the Temple in Jerusalem then from the Holy City itself. Then came crushing defeat annihilation & exile. But after the exile & the people lapsed into old idolatries & their former unfaithfulness & soon...the spirit of prophecy ceased (400 yr silence). Israel had fallen into the hands of Rome. Spiritual life was reduced to ritual, legalism & a sense of crushing moral failure reinforced by the religious elite. All the godly in Israel were waiting for **anything** that might indicate that God still cared - was still interested in them - was anything more than a distant memory or a few rituals a few times a year.

Lk later says of Simeon *eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come & rescue Israel & Anna waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem*

We know that happens to us as well. When life isn't working out, we're suffering in some way, disappointed, when the comfort/ease we view as our right is disturbed, when the lockdowns & restrictions go on unendingly & inconsistently...it's tempting for us to question God...to suspect His faithfulness, question His goodness, distrust His wisdom/love/power. It's easy to say, "God, where are You? Where is Your faithfulness? I thought you were looking out for me. I thought You were near to me. I thought You answered my prayers." When your heart questions God's wisdom - goodness - presence – or love/power, you don't turn to Him for help. You don't go for help to someone you don't trust.

And **THAT** becomes spiritually dangerous because when you convince yourself God is less than faithful to His promises - less than loving - not as near as you thought – not as invested in you as you hope, you give up all together...or maybe you just go along to get along...you fall into routine & habit & ritual but you never expect God will actually intervene...never look for his hand in your life never recognize his blessing in the day...I reckon that's where Zech is while he's at the altar.

But then there's an angel & then there's a baby **AND THEN** there's a song of praise. I love this because most of Zech's song is not about his own son but the salvation the Messiah brings & his son's not the Messiah.

Zech begins in vs 68: "*Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited & redeemed his people.*" You can see the shift...9 nine months earlier Zech couldn't believe his wife would have a child. Now, filled w/ the Holy Spirit, he is so confident of God's redeeming work in the coming Messiah that he puts it in the present continuous tense. It's already underway! It's happening **NOW!** By faith, a promised act of God is as good as done. Zech has learned to take God at his word & so has an unshakable assurance: "*God has visited AND redeemed!*" HERE. Now.

Zech comprehends that Christmas is a new reality...more than a story to entertain amuse or pacify...more than a promise that may or may not be kept...God institutes a new reality where into your life mine & the life of the world God comes to live among us...to establish his presence his power his provision right smack in the middle of our lives...to fully transform our existence into one of abundant love eternal life unsurpassed joy...*and get this because this is crucial...* John is barely days old & Zech sings as if he's standing in the middle of God's Kingdom at its finest & fullest. Zech sings as if all oppressors & tyrants are crushed & peace & rest are granted. He sings as if every chain is already broken & every grave open. Those hopes are nowhere near realized **YET** Zech sings as if they are.

In the face of every promise of God the world tells us is not true - is not trustworthy is not going to happen...you & I need to sing with Zech

*"Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited & redeemed his people. He has sent us a mighty Saviour from the royal line of his servant David, just as he promised through his holy prophets long ago.*

& then live that reality...Christmas is more than a promise... Christmas is the new reality of an enduring relationship w/ the Father – a relationship of love, provision & care. And because **THAT** reality A-L-R-E-A-D-Y exists we can live with...

- Boldness in uncertainty
- Confidence in chaos
- Assurance under assault
- Joy in the struggle
- Victory in the waiting
- Hope in the meantime
- Peace at all times

...even when the final fulfillment is still in the distance...we are called to live it in the moment...

Daniel Berrigan was an American “radical” Jesuit priest. He was staunchly opposed to the Viet Nam War & the US’s (West’s) involvement in manipulating the lives & politics of developing nations...usually for profit & not always for the good of those developing nations’ people. In his book, *Testimony: The Word Made Flesh* (Orbis, 2004), he made the distinction b/t the false reality of this world & the new reality Zech glimpses in the birth of John...He writes:

*“It is not true that creation & the human family are doomed to destruction & loss — This is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.*

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity & discrimination, hunger & poverty, death & destruction —This is true: *I have come that they may have life, & have it abundantly.*

It is not true that violence & hatred should have the last word, & that war & devastation rule forever —This is true: *Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, & the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called Wonderful Councilor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world —This is true: *All authority in heaven & on earth is given to me...& lo I am with you always; even until the end of the age.*

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers — This is true: *I will pour out my spirit on all flesh & your sons & daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions & your old men shall have dreams.*

It is not true that our hopes for the liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity of peace are not meant for this earth or for this history — This is true: *The hour comes, & it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit & truth.*

It is true...Christmas is more than a promise...It is God staking his life on our eternity. Christmas is God w/ skin in the game for our salvation. Christmas is the new reality of an enduring relationship w/ the Father – a relationship of love, provision & care. Christmas is the assurance that even when the final fulfillment is yet unseen; we have God’s word, his eternal character, that his promises are kept forever. The God who pledges: 9000 times...

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| • I will be with you.      | Is              |
| • I will protect you.      | Does            |
| • I will be your strength. | Is              |
| • I will answer you.       | Does            |
| • I will provide for you.  | Never fails.    |
| • I will give you peace.   | Always delivers |
| • I will always love you.  | Never stops     |

Let’s pray w/ that in mind: **Heavenly Father, your kindness caused the light of Christ to shine among us. Extend your mercy now we pray to all the people we meet this week who do not have joy in Christ. Let your saving love be made known to them that all hearts would turn to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**