

Advent 2 C 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

December 4, 2021

Luke 1:68-79 (psalmody)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

If you worship with us at Dove of Peace very often, you may noticed that on most Sundays, the first reading is followed by something that we call the *psalmody*. Psalmody. Many years ago, someone attended a funeral here at Dove of Peace and accosted me after the funeral. “*It’s a psalm*,” he said. “*Call it a psalm, not psalmody*. “*The word ‘psalmody’ is pretentious and confusing*. “*Call it a psalm!*”

I was raised in the South, so I probably have a different understanding of things. I would think that being a guest of Dove of Peace, for the funeral of a loved one, and stopping to tell the pastor that he and the congregation do not know what they are doing with the psalmody and that *WE* are pretentious... *That* is actually pretentious in my way of thinking. But I was raised in the South, and it was a funeral, and so I smiled and I shrugged, because I was raised a certain way. And this man was not raised the way I was raised, and so he felt entitled to instruct me about this congregation’s mistakes and missteps on his way out the door. And who am I, a Southern boy, to question him in his questioning of us? Bless his heart.

Today, the psalmody was from Luke chapter one. Next Sunday, the psalmody will be from Isaiah chapter twelve. And on the following Sunday, the psalmody will be from another part of Luke chapter two. So our psalmody does not always come from the book of capital-P Psalms. And that’s why we call it psalmody. Because it’s poetry, it’s hymnody, it is canticles, it is sung *like* a psalm. But it isn’t from the book of capital-P psalms. And even when we do use something from the book of Psalms, we don’t always use the psalm in its entirety. Nor would we want we to. And so we do not have a psalm. We have *psalmody*. *Responsorial* psalmody. And we are scrupulous about such things because we are scrupulous about the Bible, which some call the written word of God. We seek to not be sloppy about God’s words, or even what we think *might* be God’s words, or what some have alleged are God’s words. Because we care. Because this stuff matters greatly. And that is why not all psalmody can be called a psalm.

Our psalmody this morning is something that is commonly called the Song of Zechariah. Or the canticle of Zechariah. In Latin, it is known by the first word of the song: *Benedictus*. Two weeks from today our psalmody will be something that is commonly called the Song of Mary. Or the canticle of Mary. In Latin, that song is known by its first word: *Magnificat*. The Song of Zechariah, *Benedictus*, is about the birth of his son, John the Baptist. The Song of Mary, *Magnificat*, is about the birth of her son, Jesus. In much Christian tradition, Zechariah’s song is

recited in the morning. And Mary's song is recited in the evening. And so these songs have played an important role in the shaping of everyday Christian life. We are using them now, during Advent, in the runup to the birth of Jesus. But they have historically transcended the holidays and the birth of Jesus. For many Christians over many centuries, they have been songs of everyday faith.

Today's psalmody comes from the lips of the father of John the Baptist. John was born miraculously to a very old couple, Elizabeth and Zechariah, not unlike Abraham and Sarah giving birth to Isaac. Zechariah doubted that such a pregnancy would be possible. And for his doubt, Zechariah was struck speechless. *Because you did not believe my words*, Gabriel said, *you will become unable to speak until the day these things occur*. This was the angel Gabriel, entitled "archangel" in the Christian tradition. Gabriel said, you and your wife are going to become pregnant. And you will name your son John when he is born. And so when the baby was born, eight days passed until his circumcision, according to Jewish practice. And on the eighth day he was circumcised and given his name. They asked the father Zechariah what the name of the boy should be. And he was still unable to speak. So he wrote out the name John by hand— John being the name that Gabriel had declared. And when Zechariah completed that task, he was able to speak again, and today's psalmody is the first thing that he said after being silent for nine months or so.

If I had my mouth wired shut for nine months, I don't know what I would say after being silent for so long. But whatever I would say, it wouldn't be this good. I strongly encourage you to read this text at home, in your own Bible. It is always worthwhile in December to read the first chapter of Luke in its entirety. It's the longest chapter in the New Testament. And when you come to church on Christmas Eve, the gospel reading is Luke chapter two. So one of the best Advent practices is to read Luke chapter one. Maybe more than once. The *psalmody* of Evangelical Lutheran Worship has modified the text in some ways to make it more suitable for worship, and I think in this case it is also an important enough text that you should read it unmodified in the pages of the actual Bible.

One thing you will note when you read chapter one of the Gospel According to Luke is that John is born ahead of Jesus. They are kin, presumably something like cousins. John is born ahead of Jesus, begins his ministry before Jesus, is arrested before Jesus, and is executed by rulers ahead of Jesus. So John is what the Church calls the forerunner. Which is also strongly indicated in today's first reading (Malachi 3:1) and in today's gospel reading (Luke 3:4). However, the Magnificat, the song of Mary, is placed before the Benedictus, the song of Zechariah. So even though John is ahead of Jesus, the song about Jesus precedes the song about John. Which is Luke's way of saying that Jesus was, in a certain sense, prior to John. And you'll get that by reading the entirety of Luke's first chapter.

When you re-read this psalmody in context, I would also draw your attention to verse 71, which states: *from the hands of all who hate us*. I think this is a New Testament acknowledgment of what began to be called "anti-Semitism" at the end of the 19th century. That God's chosen people

are also persecuted and hated as a people, as a race. Part of what makes these words endure is their uncanny ability to speak to us today.

And, when you re-read this psalmody in context, I would call your attention to verse 75, which speaks of holiness and righteousness. And that word righteousness is the word I discussed here on Reformation Sunday, for it is the same word that is sometimes translated “justified” or “justification.” So I think there is a little bit of the Apostle Paul and just a teensy bit of the Lutheran Reformation right here. That what God is going to do is to rescue people from their enemies so that they can live in holiness and righteousness. Which is a statement of the good news that is consistent with, and congruent with, the Lutheran notion of justification in Christ. So the birth of John the Baptist is a forerunner of many things. Perhaps even a forerunner of those beer-drinking Germans of Wittenberg.

And, when you re-read this psalmody in context, verse 79 uses the verb “shine.” It’s a translation of the Greek verb *epiphainō*, or Epiphany. The only occurrence of that verb in the gospels. We have named an important Christian holy day Epiphany, and in some churches a whole winter season is called Epiphany. Which means that Jesus shines brightly. But here in verse 79, Zechariah declares how and why Jesus will shine: *to shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.* That’s where and why the light comes. The shadow of death is virtually verbatim from the 23rd psalm: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.* It’s truly remarkable. Zechariah manages to invoke the whole history of Israel, the prophets, Abraham, and the psalms. Something that will be said of his son John. And something that will be said of the evangelist himself, Luke.

I encourage you to read the first chapter of Luke this month. Verses 68 through 79 could be called a psalm or a psalmody. Just as John the Baptist was a cousin of Jesus, these verses are the lesser known cousin of the *Magnificat*, which will be part of our worship service two weeks from today, the psalmody on December 19. But John the Baptist is about more than living in the wilderness and eating locusts and wild honey. John is about preparing a way. How we prepare a way. How God prepares a way. And not just for the coming of Christ on December 25. But for the coming of Christ into all of the places where we live in darkness and in the shadow of death. Amen.