

## Birth of John the Baptist

I do love Mary's song – the Magnificat, which was part of last week's reading. It speaks of God lifting up the lowly. It's a song of hope and justice and turning the world around. But if I had to pick what I think is the most beautiful song in scripture – even including the Psalms, Zechariah's song might actually be it.

And in particular, I love these verses:

<sup>78</sup> Because of the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
<sup>79</sup> to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The dawn from on high will break upon us...is a line drenched in hope. Those two verses resonate with people of all times and places. This morning I'm going to focus primarily on those two verses.

Zechariah's song is one of those passages that can be daunting to preach on, because you want to not turn it into something dry and not beautiful. But here goes anyway.

Let's start with the tender mercy of our God. The word tender hardly gets at what this is. The Greek word is *splanchna*.

From that root we get the word *splanchnic*, which refers to the visceral organs – the internal organs in the abdomen mainly. The guts.

So tender mercy is really better translated gut-wrenching compassion. God sees the plight of God's people. The Jewish people were struggling under the weight of the Roman Empire and its taxes. Rome kept the peace through violence. Shadowy groups of Jews wanted to use violence as well to take back their nation, raising the threat of massive Roman retaliation.

There had been no prophets to proclaim peace or justice for hundreds of years. For hundreds of years, they had lived in a sort of limbo, under foreign rule and not free to be God's people as they had once been.

Their religious leaders struggled to find ways to live and help their people live in a world that didn't really allow them to follow the practice of their faith in the way they wanted.

Some of the higher religious leaders completely failed them and backed their Roman oppressors.

For years, they have heard the promise of a Messiah, God's chosen one who would come and set them free and return them to their former glory. For years they have hoped and prayed for that Messiah.

On top of that, Elizabeth and Zechariah have personally experienced the darkness of infertility. They have experienced the sorrow of dying with no heirs.

In the midst of all that, an angel appears and announces a new dawn, for the elderly couple and for all people.

Then the angel appears again, this time to a young woman, and again announces a new dawn for all people.

These two astounding pregnancies and now the birth of John filled people with awe...fear even. No matter how much they might have prayed for that Messiah, now that it was coming near, they were afraid. They knew that his coming would result in a tremendous upheaval...they just didn't know what it would look like.

As Zechariah, inspired by the Spirit, chanted his song, imagine how they all must have felt. God has redeemed them – God redeemed them in the past and plans to redeem them again. To gain their freedom and save them from their enemies.

Zechariah recites their history of the covenant God made with them...a covenant God intends to keep.

This special baby, this newborn prophet, will prepare the way for God's coming salvation.

God has seen their plight. God sees them sitting in darkness. God sees them sitting in the darkness of hopelessness and despair. They sit in the darkness of anger and hatred.

God sees that the shadow of death follows them, whether it's death from hunger or disease...or death from the violence of Roman soldiers or the horror of crucifixion. God sees their suffering.

And God's gut-wrenching compassion puts the wheels in motion.

As John lets out his first newborn cries, the sky begins to lighten. And the people begin to trust that the dawn really is going to come. The light will come to lead their feet into peace...into shalom.

We know that none of it went down the way anyone thought it would. John would be executed. Jesus would be executed. His resurrection finally brought the dawn. But we still wait for its final fulfillment. We still often sit in darkness and the shadow of death.

But, in the midst of it, the promise remains.

More than that, we do still get that dawn over and over as we are freed, even a tiny bit, from the weight of our own sorrows and pain.

Has anyone heard of the singer, Marianne Faithfull? She's a British rock singer who was part of the British invasion in the 60's and 70's. If I played one of her earliest songs, *As Tears Go By*, I think if you listened to the radio in the 60's you might recognize it. I got into her music in the 80's and have lately rediscovered it.

Like many musicians, her career and life got derailed by addiction. She did recover, and her music often reflects her experience with addiction and the journey to recovery.

One of her songs from the 80's starts with these lyrics:

When will the morning come?

I wait in darkness so long

Will the sun ever rise again?

Hours flowing over me

I wait in vain for some change

Will light ever pierce this pain?

She's still alive and in recovery, and at 77, she apparently still performs. Her dawn did eventually come.

Songs and poetry so often speak to us in ways that other things can't. They can resonate with our experiences. My experiences aren't Marianne Faithfull's, but we've likely all been in a place where we felt like we were waiting in darkness.

Addiction is just one thing that can bring people to sit in darkness and the shadow of death. And recovery from addiction is indeed the breaking of the dawn.

But of course, there are many others. Maybe you've been sick, or grieving, and a friend showed up just when you needed them.

Or the darkness of conflict with someone you care about gave way to the dawn as healing and reconciliation happened.

Our own healing, our own realization of the gut-wrenching mercy God shows us are the start of a dawn that can spread from us to others in need of that healing.

As a society, we experience darkness and the shadow of death as we live in a world where shootings are commonplace, where racist and xenophobic lies put vulnerable people at risk, and where anxiety over the world situation gnaws at us.

So in our own time, with Zechariah and Elizabeth and their friends and family, we await the final fulfillment of this promise. We await the time when the dawn from on high breaks upon the whole world, bringing peace...bringing shalom.

In the meantime, we cherish those times when the dawn breaks on us in smaller ways, taking away guilt and shame. Taking away bitterness and hatred. Taking away loneliness and fear and confusion. Bringing healing. We experience in small ways our own feet being led into the way of peace.

And we trust that what is now true for us in small ways will one day be true for the whole world -

<sup>78</sup> Because of the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

<sup>79</sup> to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace."