

Sermon – December 6, 2009

Paul H. Thwaite

The Way of Peace

Luke 1:67-79

“...to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:79)

Well, it's been quite a week in the life of the Thwaite family! On Monday morning, I hugged Jan and Katie and Becca as they left for work and school. The hugs were especially sweet as I knew we were moving into a time of living separately for the next 6 weeks or so.

I stopped by the office at the Pleasant Hills Community Presbyterian Church to pick up my final paycheck. 14+ years of wonderful ministry and fellowship together had come full circle. God was so good to me and the people in that congregation over and over again. I pulled my metallic name plate off the board listing staff members and with a lump in my throat headed up the stairs and out to the parking lot for the last time as one of their pastors. My mind and heart were in a state of upheaval to put it mildly!

Then began the drive to my new call in ministry here in Orchard Lake! How blessed I am in these challenging economic times to move seamlessly from one place of employment to another! Emotions were flowing as I drove across the roads through Pittsburgh where so many special times have been experienced. I was leaving behind the familiar and known for the new and unknown – something many of us have experienced at different times in our life journey. But probably not like Zechariah did in his life journey.

Zechariah was doing his normal stint serving as priest in the temple one day. According to Luke, he and his wife Elizabeth were *“righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.”* (Luke 1:6-7) Good people who were experiencing a difficult thing – no children, a significant handicap in days when children

rather than Social Security and 401(k)'s were the economic future of a family. And cause for others to whisper behind their backs about whether or not God was punishing them for some hidden sin.

Not unlike each of us I suspect: good people, trying as best we can to follow God's path in our lives, but experiencing in one way or another something in our journey that leaves us uneasy, uncertain, lacking that sense of peace and assurance that everything is going to turn out okay for us in the long run, wondering if God is off duty.

You know the story – Zechariah was visited by the angel Gabriel during that regular daily stint in the Temple. It turned his life upside down – Luke tells us he was terrified and overwhelmed with fear, a double emphasis that could be loosely translated “What the #@?#?% is going on?” Gabriel proceeds to tell him he and Elizabeth will bear a son – good news certainly, but Zechariah is a bit on the skeptical side since he and Elizabeth had long since given up hope for this blessing due to their advanced age.

Well, Gabriel affirms that what is impossible humanly speaking is completely within God's power to accomplish! And, since Zechariah doesn't seem to be willing to accept that possibility, he is given nine months of silence to think it over while watching God's hand work around him to do exactly what Gabriel said!

Fast forward nine months. The unbelievable and unexpected has come true – Elizabeth gives birth to a son as Gabriel had predicted. The family is going to name him Zechariah, a normal tradition in the culture of that time naming the first born son after his father. But Zechariah the dad has seen God's hand at work. He takes Gabriel at his word this time and, using a writing tablet, he announces the son will be named John, as God has directed. What else can Zechariah do at this incredible moment in his life than offer a prayer of praise to the God who has worked in such an amazing way in his unfolding life journey?

His offering of praise – known as the Benedictus after the opening words “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel” – is a celebration of the work of God not only for Zechariah but for the whole nation of Israel. And not only for Israel, but also for all of us whose faith heritage connects back to the promises of blessing by God first given to Abraham. Perhaps you noticed as I read it this morning it is a song of praise filled with both joy and reality. It soars with thanks and praise to the God who has promised to redeem his people by sending a Savior, a promise now centuries old yet still unfulfilled: One who would bring God’s mercy, One who would offer forgiveness of sin, One who would restore them to who God has intended them to be.

But the song is filled with real life reality as well! Much like Elizabeth and Zechariah’s promise of having a child, perhaps this promise of a Savior seems too good to be true. The evidence at hand was all too harsh. After all, the Israelites were surrounded by enemies and despised by their foes. They were a people living in the darkness of Roman oppression and the threat of violence and death if they did not toe the line of their oppressors. They longed for peace as much as anyone! And they had waited...and waited...and waited. Zechariah senses God is about to answer the fervent prayers of his beloved children – and he shares his joy in the final words of this prayer: *“the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”* (Lk.1:78-79)

Light for those living in darkness...a way of peace for those dealing with the uncertainty and anxiety life brings...that’s what we are looking for in the Advent experience, isn’t it? God promises to lead us on the way of peace when we open our hearts to the presence of the one who comes bringing Light into this world of so much darkness. This peace is the biblical shalom so prevalent in Scripture – the wholeness, the completeness God intended all along for his creation, lost in Eden but restored in Christ, awaiting its final fulfillment at the Second Advent of Jesus someday in the future. But until then, we can experience that way of peace as we open our hearts to Christ and allow his presence and light to reside in us –

- Peace in our relationship with God in Christ by the Holy Spirit.
- Peace within ourselves as we become who Christ intends for us to be even in the face of life's real challenges and uncertainty.
- Peace with others as we allow Christ to bring healing to fractured human relationships among people and nations.
- Peace with God's beautiful creation as we live out more faithfully the stewardship God entrusted to us in the beginning.

Lord, our prayer is for you to guide our feet to find this way of peace in this Advent season and always! In the name of the Prince of Peace, Amen.