

Sermon: Reign of Christ Sunday, November 20, 2022 – Luke 1: 68-79
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Some of you will have grown up in Churches where the Liturgical Calendar of the year is an important thing, and for others it will be a more recent and/or less important. Today, in the Gregorian Calendar, is just a day – November 20th – but by the Liturgical calendar today is the last day of the year. (For those curious as to how this calendar works, you'll find a Liturgical calendar posted in Gordon Hall).

Known as “Reign of Christ” Sunday, today we bring to mind all those times that Jesus preached about the Kingdom or Kin-dom of God, that new realm when the existing power structures get inverted, and we acknowledge the centrality of Christ in that realm. As we did in the opening prayer today, we recall all the ways that God is already active in the world, as we look a little bit forward to a new Church year, beginning next Sunday, and decisively forward to that time commonly known as the “second coming” or Parousia, as we anticipate this new realm, letting go of the brokenness of the current ways in favour of a complete renewal of God’s initial creative intent.

The scripture reading we heard this morning stands in this liminal space, between God’s actions thus far, and great hopes for what will come next. The setting is the Jerusalem Temple, the event is the ritual circumcision or bris of a baby named John whom we will get to know in adulthood as John the Baptist, and the speaker is John’s father, Zechariah, who had just been given his voice back by God. Zechariah begins by naming God’s faithfulness and the hopes for a better and more just future that have always been included in those actions. Then Zechariah turns from that opening sermon of faith and starts to speak directly to his young son. He envisions his child playing a pivotal role in ushering in a new realm, a realm with an entirely new social order, a realm to be inaugurated by John’s not-yet-born cousin, Jesus.

Audrey West, a Seminary Professor from the Moravian tradition, beautifully describes what Zechariah does here, as she writes

“Like a melody in a musical overture, Zechariah’s prophecy hints at things to come, while reflecting refrains from long before. Together with other ‘songs’ in Luke — such as the songs of Mary (Luke 1:46-55), the heavenly host (1:14) and Simeon (1:29-32) — Zechariah’s contribution to the musical score offers a symphony of praise to the God who is, who has been, and who always will be working among God’s people.

“Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah [points] backward, to God’s long-established covenant with God’s people. This is the “Lord God of Israel” (Luke 1:68), who has raised up a savior “in the house of his servant David” (1:69). God’s promises have come “from of old” through the prophets (1:70), given first to “our ancestors” (1:72)....Whatever else might be happening that day at the Temple—or later, through the life of this child—it is in line with God’s holy covenant with the people (1:72).

And then Zechariah’s attention turns from the family, friends and religious personnel present for the circumcision ceremony, to the infant child in his arms: “Before long, the day will come when his own son will prepare the way for God’s son, participating in God’s mission of salvation by calling people to repentance for the forgiveness of sins (1:77; 3:3,6). It is a mighty task to be prophet of the Most High (1:76; see also 7:28), and the rulers of the age will not go easy on him.... But on this day, when John is barely a week old, his father is filled with the hope that accompanies new life. It is the hope of salvation for all people: Jews and

Gentiles, insiders and outsiders, rich and poor, blind and lame, tax collectors and sinners, women and men, old and young, fishermen and farmers, Samaritans and soldiers, lepers and lawyers, and many others. As Zechariah waits, as we all wait, for the unfolding of God's purposes in John, we look ahead to the one who is more powerful than he (3:16), the one who is to come, whose own name portends that all flesh shall see the salvation of God (3:6)".

What a powerful statement of faith: not just having hopeful thoughts about his son's life, but recognizing the connection between what this child is going to do, and the Messiah that his son is going to announce, with everything that God has done thus far.

It's not often that we get that big a picture when we gather here on Sundays. I have no particular quarrel with my usual approach to a Sunday service and sermon, i.e., taking a brief passage of scripture as suggested by the Sunday Lectionary, studying it in some depth, discerning what it was saying to its original audience and what it might say to us. But today, by the nature of the words of Zechariah and the role that Reign of Christ Sunday plays in the Christian year, we step back – wayyyyyy back – and see not only one moment in our faith journey, but the entirety of the journey, the reason for it all, the meaning of it all. The best analogy I can come up with, is that my spiritual life and my sermon-writing practice, can at times be like hiking on a trail that is so root-bound that all of your attention needs to be on finding a safe place for that next step. Step after step, I grunt along, head down out of necessity and when that happens, I don't get much out of my surroundings, other than the sounds of birdsong and the scents of the forest. But when on a trail like that, I have learned that every so often I must pause, look up and around, and drink in the majestic beauty of everything around me.

That, to me, is what Zechariah does here. He and his spouse, Elizabeth, had spent so many years praying for a child and here he is, in so many ways a "child of promise". Zechariah, in this moment of gratitude and hope, stands amidst all that was, and is, and is to come, the entire story of faith thus far connected integrally with what is coming next. Elizabeth and her husband will have some challenges ahead, raising a rather spirited child later in life, but there is no question that they see this young life within the big story of a loving, present God.

Although coming to Church may seem like just a small thing, 40-or-so people gathered in this lovely space and others experiencing it online, each time we gather for worship we enter that bigger space, whether we know it or not. Each time we open ourselves to God in prayer, we enter into a holy space that other people of faith elsewhere in the world are in at that very moment. Each time we remember and enact God's loving intent for those living without hope, each time we remember something that has illumined our way when we were living in shadows of gloom and allow ourselves to be inspired to acts of courage and fidelity, we celebrate the holy path known as the unfolding of the kin-dom of God. What I do, what we do, is neither small nor limited; this moment, participates in all of God's moments and that is a wondrous thing.

In his words recounting the faith history of his people, and his moving words to his son, full of both hope and trepidation, Zechariah speaks of the ways that God has been present to the needs of the people, the way that the hopes they placed in God have not been misplaced. On screen, you'll see his words, this time from the Common English Bible translation, showing God's "action words"(in **bold**) and the role to be played by John (**bold italics**)... and the next actions to be initiated by God:

⁶⁸ "Bless the Lord God of Israel

because he **has come to help and has delivered** his people.

⁶⁹ He **has raised up a mighty savior** for us in his servant David's house,
⁷⁰ just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago.
⁷¹ He **has brought salvation** from our enemies and from the power of all those who hate us.
⁷² He **has shown the mercy promised** to our ancestors,
 and **remembered his holy covenant**,
⁷³ the solemn pledge he made to our ancestor Abraham.
 He has **granted** ⁷⁴ **that we would be rescued**
 from the power of our enemies so that we could serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and
 righteousness in God's eyes, for as long as we live.

⁷⁶ ***You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High,
 for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.***

⁷⁷ ***You will tell his people how to be saved
 through the forgiveness of their sins.***

⁷⁸ **Because of our God's deep compassion,
 the dawn from heaven will break upon us,**

⁷⁹ **to give light to those who are sitting in darkness
 and in the shadow of death, to guide us on the path of peace."**

Turning once more to the words of Audrey West, we read that the God described by Zechariah "is no distant God, content to set the world in motion and then to leave it alone. This is the God who comes 'to give light to those who sit...in the shadow of death' (Luke 1:79), the God who has raised up a savior for us. The promise given long ago through the birth, naming, and circumcision of John is the same as the promise given today: God is active among God's people, here and now."

As we stand on the cusp of a new Church year,
 as we seek ways that our new amalgamated self will reach out to the communities we serve in Christ's name,
 as we address the chaotic social and political and environmental realities swirling around us,
 as we recall the words of prophets and martyrs and the Christ,
 as we allow ourselves to be hopeful again, trusting in God's high hopes for us...
 we give thanks for all of it. We give thanks for the path that has brought us this far, we give thanks for opportunities ahead, we give thanks for the places we have triumphed and we give thanks for the harder learnings that have left a mark. For the holy, heavenly big picture, the already and the not yet, we bless our gracious, faithful, eternal God. Amen.

References cited:

Gamber, Jenifer. "Liturgical Calendar." <https://buildfaith.org/the-liturgical-year/>

West, Audrey. [https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-168-79-2#:~:text=As%20if%20in%20response%2C%20Zechariah,%E2%80%9D%20\(Luke%201%3A78%2D](https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-168-79-2#:~:text=As%20if%20in%20response%2C%20Zechariah,%E2%80%9D%20(Luke%201%3A78%2D)