

# The Songs of Christmas

## Zechariah's Song

Sunday, November 29, 2020

**Main Text:** Luke 1:67-79

Supporting Texts: Genesis 21:1; 50:24-25; Exodus 3:16; 1 Samuel 2:21; Psalm 107:10-11; Isaiah 9:2; 40:3-5; Jeremiah 29:10; Luke 1:23-24

### INTRO

Christians are singers. We have sung throughout church history.

Martin Luther wrote, "...next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world. It controls our thoughts, minds, hearts, and spirits.... A person who gives this some thought and yet does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs."<sup>1</sup>

Songs spur us to action.

Luke 1:23-24 — Zechariah is mute for 9+ months. This song is his first words. Pay attention to what it is calling us to do.

### Luke 1:67-79

#### WHO GOD COMES TO

Notice how many times he mentions "us," "our," and "his people." Fourteen times. Zechariah's song is for the insiders, the people of the covenant, Jewish people who already worship God.

Verse 79—he calls us "those living in darkness and in the shadow of death." What kind of person would choose to live there? See Psalm 107:10-11 and Isaiah 9:2 for background.

When God visits, he comes to his people who find themselves in darkness of their own making.

#### THE VISITATION AND SALVATION

In this darkness, Zechariah praises God for what he has done. He has "come to" or "visited" his people in verse 68. This is the same kind of coming that Zechariah's ancestors were acquainted with because it was not God's first time visiting. The Old Testament uses this word in several places.

1. God visited women who were unable to conceive (Genesis 21:1; 1 Samuel 2:21).
2. God watched over his people in Egypt (Genesis 50:24-25; Exodus 3:16).
3. God will restore his people after the exile (Jeremiah 29:10).

These three parts of Israel's history—the Exodus, the exile, and the birth of promised children—all are in the forefront of Luke's mind as he conveys the significance of what is happening in the visitation of God.

In the birth of Christ, the exile that Israel was still in would finally end.

In the birth of Christ, there would start a new exodus where God delivers his people, not from a foreign power, but from the darkness and sin they are in.

In the birth of Christ, God would come through for a virgin who was promised to conceive and have a child.

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<sup>1</sup> Luther, Martin. From Luther's Forward to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae*. Qtd. in Drury, Keith. *The Wonder of Worship*, p. 4.

For the exile to end, Israel must have salvation from our enemies (vv. 71, 74). Yet Jesus doesn't come to rescue them from Rome, but commands them to love their enemies (Lk. 6).

For the exile to end, Israel must have the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins (v. 77). N.T. Wright says, "Throughout both major and minor prophets there runs the twin theme: Israel's exile is the result of her own sin, idolatry, and apostasy, and the problem will be solved by YHWH's dealing with the sin and thus restoring his people to their inheritance. Exile will be undone when sin is forgiven."<sup>2</sup>

## PREPARING A PEOPLE

The whole history of God with his people has been preparation for this coming. Zechariah used terms that every Jewish listener would recognize, all of them connecting the births of John and Jesus with the covenant to Abraham, the exodus of Moses, King David, and a return from exile in a new exodus. All of this culminates in the birth of Zechariah's son, John.

We expect that Zechariah will sing about his son more than he does, but only verses 76-77 are about John (see Isaiah 40:3-5 for background).

The preparation for the coming of Christ is going to be painful. Not painful for non-Christians, but for those who think they've already got their act together, for us. If we are to receive Jesus anew this Advent, it will mean letting God bulldoze the hills we have made in our hearts.

Robert Webber says that John the Baptist "confronts us with the message that God uses people in our lives to tell us the truth about ourselves. He was by his very lifestyle as well as his words a confrontation, calling people to repentance and conversion of life. We need to ask whether there is a John the Baptist in our lives who, unpleasant as it may be, points out by his or her example a sinful habit or desire in our lives with which we need to deal."<sup>3</sup> In other words, the preparation God knew we needed to receive Christ at Christmas is repentance.

There are two temptations:

1. To neglect our need of repentance.
2. To remain in repentance mode so long we never get to serving.

Here's the truth. **We're all in darkness. We all need forgiveness. It's time for repentance.**

## YOU

Repentance involves admitting where we've been wrong with real specifics.

Repentance also involves contrition.

And finally repentance involves doing what you can to make things right. While this isn't always possible, it's necessary.

## FOR FURTHER READING

In addition to the footnoted resources, I consulted Fleming Rutledge's book *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*. The story about the hills being leveled is from pp. 290-291.

N.T. Wright's book is weighty and difficult to read, but Robert Webber's is excellent and accessible for most.

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<sup>2</sup> Wright, N.T. *The New Testament and the People of God*, p. 273.

<sup>3</sup> Webber, Robert. *Ancient-Future Time*. p. 46.