

May 20, 2018  
Sunday Morning Service  
Series: Luke  
Community Baptist Church  
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Greer, SC 29650  
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*To Ponder . . .*

Questions to ponder as we prepare to hear from Luke 1:57-80.

1. Would you rather that God be fair with you or merciful to you and why?
2. Why was the name “John” such an important issue? (And compare this to what people name children today.)
3. What should be the response when God interrupts “normal life” by His acts of mercy?
4. Why should we consider the fact important that Zechariah spoke “being filled with the Holy Spirit”?
5. Consider the importance of Zechariah’s statement that God was in the process of fulfilling His promises to Abraham (vv.70-75).

### **PROMISE OF THE FORERUNNER FULFILLED**

#### **Luke 1:57-80**

To be fair is to act according to established rules or standards. Being fair is a really big issue in our culture. We all just want a fair deal. But what does that mean? As a people, we appeal to the signal statement in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence which reads: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights . . .*

That statement has come to mean that every person must be afforded the same opportunities, the same rights, the same kind of treatment, regardless of personal abilities or responsibility or character. To be treated fairly is the hue and cry heard over and over from the negotiations of businesses to decisions about college entrance. The cry for fairness is so incessant that some entrepreneurs are forced out of business because a particular social group concludes they are not being fair. In fact, as the established rules and standards change, the quest for fairness has actually resulted in punishment against those who are perceived to be governed by God’s truth, the principles of the Bible. That reality proves that God’s standard of fairness and human standards of fairness are not necessarily the same.

But do you really want God to treat you fairly? Not if you are familiar with the rules and standards of righteousness. God’s justice demands that He punish all thoughts and actions that fall short of His righteousness. His mercy, conversely, takes pity on us pitiful sinners. God’s mercy withholds from us the justice we deserve. It is because of God’s mercy that He sent the Savior Jesus Christ to pay the penalty for our sins. It is because of His mercy that He willingly forgives the sin of all who confess to Him.

The story of John the Baptist’s birth is the story of God’s mercy, not God’s fairness. The theme shows up in this text a couple of times. Because God is merciful, He sent the promised Savior/Messiah to deliver His people from bondage to their sin. Because God is merciful, He sent John to prepare the way for the Savior. In short, God fulfilled His amazing promises, some of which spanned centuries of time, because He delights to show mercy.

#### **God Fulfilled His Promise (vv.57-66).**

God delivered on His great promise about the forerunner. The fulfillment of that promise was according to God’s perfect timing. *Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son (v.57).* The first verse of our text begins with the words *the time came*, which literally means that the time *was filled*. The words announce the apex of redemptive history. Luke’s story about Christ is the story of the Creator arranging all things according to His will and His timing. The birth of John and of Jesus were not interesting

coincidences, but the perfectly timed activity of God. Likewise, all the seeming coincidences that make up the events and circumstances of our lives are actually the perfectly timed activity of God.

These perfectly timed events are always according to God's mercy. Regarding John's birth we read, *And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her (v.58)*. In a small, secluded village in the Judean hills, any birth was going to be a public event. But especially this birth was important because of the Lord's mercy. Zechariah and Elizabeth had served the Lord faithfully for many years. But Elizabeth had never been able to fulfill God's plan for Israelite couples to be fruitful and multiply. Now God had shown mercy and she delivered a son.

The people from the neighborhood rejoiced in God's mercy. Isn't that the way it should be? When God has been merciful to forgive our sins and do the miracle of regeneration, there ought to be evidence of it. God's people will rejoice when the evidence of His mercy on a sinner results in the new birth. When the people saw the mercy of God extended in the birth of John, *they rejoiced with her (i.e. Elizabeth)*. The verb means they "shared the joy." "Share the joy" of the recipient of God's mercy is a good way to describe it. Inability to rejoice in God's mercy is a serious indication of a serious spiritual problem. The text reveals that God simply fulfilled what He had promised through his angelic messenger Gabriel. *"And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth" (Luke 1:14)*.

God also fulfilled His promise about the forerunner's name. At the advent of John's birth, all the normal people planned to do the normal thing. *And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name" (vv.5-61)*.

According to God's law, the Hebrew male child would be circumcised on the eighth day. Zechariah and Elizabeth obeyed the law. According to tradition, at that same time, the parents would name the boy. Also according to tradition, the child would be given a name that honored the father or grandfather or great grandfather. Tradition didn't float in this case because Elizabeth believed

Gabriel's message from God more than Zechariah had. In obedience to God, Elizabeth named her boy John. And all the neighbors who had been rejoicing in this display of God's mercy said in one voice, "We have never done it that way!"

When God's mercy overwhelms normal circumstances, traditions tend to fall by the wayside. That was definitely the case when Zechariah communicated God's plan. *And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered (vv.62-63)*. Zechariah did not agree with popular sentiment, which often is a good idea. Rather, he agreed with God in accordance with the promise God had made through Gabriel.

And all the people wondered what in the world was going on. Normal life is generally pretty predictable. When God interrupts the predictability of normal life with His display of mercy, it ought to make people wonder. Oh that God would interrupt our lives with mercy. Or that we would be spiritually awake enough to realize that God is regularly pouring out His mercy on His people.

God is still pouring out mercy on sinners and giving them new life according to His promises. He is constantly fulfilling His promise to make us more like the Savior. He regularly reminds us that all of His promises are absolutely certain through Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20). If we could just see the outworking of God's mercy before our spiritual eyes.

While God was fulfilling so many of His promises, He also fulfilled His promise about Zechariah being able to speak. God did a miracle. *And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God*. The promise God had made was: *"And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time" (Luke 1:20)*.

God kept His promise that time also, and immediately Zechariah became mute. By this time in the story, Zechariah had been humbled for nine months because he was slow to trust God's word. His story reminds us that our faith grows best in periods of humility. We learn to trust God to be faithful to His promises while we are empty of self. So Zechariah's faith grew when the word of God about

his silence came to pass. Surely his faith grew even more when his old, barren wife conceived.

Now, as Zechariah was fully trusting in God to do all that God promised, God showed him mercy. God kept His promise and opened Zechariah's mouth so he could speak. And now, acting in complete faith in God's promises, Zechariah spoke, blessing God. There is nothing like the recognition and experience of God's mercy to humble us as we should be and then to loosen our tongue to praise God as we should. It is human nature to doubt God and, therefore, to ignore the truths and promises of His Word. But the child of God, feeding on God's promises daily, should see God's faithfulness displayed regularly.

When we observe God fulfilling His words, we should be struck with the fact that this is the outpouring of His mercy. When we realize how much we need God's mercy, and then experience that mercy, we will respond. Herein lies a contrast between religious expressions that are all about people and genuine praise that blesses God. So much of modern praise is really about how people think, what people feel, what people accomplish by their own strength, and what mere people think they deserve. Genuine praise is all about God. Great is His faithfulness. His mercies are new every morning.

God's mercy caused the people to wonder. *And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him (vv.65-66).*

Fear is not the response we would expect when we become aware that God is doing a merciful work. We typically think of fear as undesirable trembling in the face of irrepressible danger. History is full of evidence that tyrants and wicked despots control people by striking fear in their hearts. Today there are an estimated 70,000 Christians imprisoned in horrific slave compounds in North Korea. Dictator Kim Jong-un will not tolerate people who worship any god other than himself – who he mistakenly believes is God. The irony is that at least 70,000 Christians actually fear the true God, not that wicked and foolish dictator who will one day die and be cast into the Lake of Fire by the true God.

Fear of God is awesome respect for His person and His power. That kind of fear is always the fitting response to the display of God's mercy. At the time of John's birth, God was fulfilling promise after promise in relatively quick succession. Such a display of mercy should have drawn respect and praise from the people. Considering this rash of God's promises being fulfilled, we are reminded of Joshua's assessment of God's work in settling His people in the Promised Land. Joshua recorded, *Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass (Joshua 21:45).*

### **Zechariah's Response (vv.67-80).**

In response to God's mercy, the old priest revealed the specific promises God fulfilled. He spoke God's words as he broke out into benediction. *And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied (v.67).* Obviously, the cause for rejoicing was the birth of the promised son John. But Zechariah's *benedictus* focused on the One whose way John would prepare. That is because Zechariah's response was not simply the expression of human emotion. He was overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit to speak Scripture, which is forever settled in heaven and is profitable for us the people of God.

In his song of praise, Zechariah acknowledged God's work in behalf of His people. He declared that God has visited and redeemed. *Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people (v.68).* It is true that God's visiting was manifested through the miraculous birth of the forerunner John. But Zechariah's reference is to God visiting and redeeming His people sometime in the past. The Creator established the plan of redemption in eternity. God determined to provide the price to buy me out of the penalty and power of enslaving sin before I was even born. Before the miracle births of John and Jesus, God had already visited and redeemed His people according to His sovereign plans. Can we trust Him to carry out that astonishing work of mercy?

Zechariah declared that God has raised up the Savior. *"... And has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David" (v.69).* The horn is a picture of power and authority. In

Daniel's visions of future world authorities, he saw pictures of beasts with horns. There was a small horn, a large horn, and multiple horns. The horns represented the power and authority of world leaders who would come to power in the coming days. Some came to power before Daniel died. Others came to power in later years. A couple of them have not yet come to power.

God raised up the ultimate power and authority from the house of David to bring salvation. That is the story of Jesus Christ who Daniel saw as the Son of Man who is the final Ruler for all eternity. Daniel wrote, *I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14).* Jesus Christ the "Son of Man" is the horn God has raised up to do battle with all the forces of Satan and hell, who has already guaranteed the victory.

God has kept the word He spoke through the old prophets. *As he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant (vv.70-72).* God's people Israel will ultimately be saved from all their enemies. Why is the tiny nation of Israel so despised and hated? It is interesting that at this time Israel's neighbors like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon are interested in establishing peace with Israel. But Iran and Syria still call for her complete annihilation. I find it quite interesting that the same liberal element of American ideology who deny God, promote sexual immorality and perversion, and are in favor of killing babies through abortion, side with Israel's enemies. This is neither an illusion or coincidence.

God's enemies are always Israel's enemies. By visiting His people through the Redeemer, God as guaranteed that one day His people's enemies will all be destroyed. That was the promise God made with Abraham and reiterated through prophets for centuries after. And so Zechariah revealed that God has kept His oath to Abraham. *The oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve*

*him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days (vv.73-75).*

God's plan for His people has always been for them to serve Him freely. Free service to God must be absent of fear for enemies and yet carried out in fear (awesome respect) for God. Awesome respect is manifested in holiness and righteousness. What is true for God's people Israel is also true for God's people the Church. We battle continually with the enemy of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Satan, the author of sin, desires for sin to take down every single child of God. We who are secure in our salvation brought by Jesus's sacrifice serve Him without fear of Satan's power to take us to hell with Him. And we serve with awesome respect for God who determines the standard of righteousness and holiness for us.

Finally, in his *benedictus* Zechariah revealed God's plan for John. John would be God's spokesman to prepare the way of the Lord. He was to be **the** prophet. *And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High (v.76a).* God, the Most High, determined in eternity that John would be His prophet. The prophets were God's chosen mouthpieces. They faithfully relayed God's message to God's people. There had not been a prophet in Israel since the time of Malachi who died somewhere around 415 B.C. God had not spoken through prophets for 400 years—but now He was ready to speak again.

God raised up John to prepare the Lord's ways. *For you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways (v.76b).* John would prepare the way of the Most High. That means that through his preaching John would make the roadway clear for God the Father's truth. More precisely, it means that John's preaching would prepare the way of Jesus Christ who is equivalent to the Most High.

He was to enlighten God's people about salvation. *To give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins (v.77).* John preached that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand (Matthew 3:2). This meant that the King of Heaven was present. He brought the righteousness and holiness of God to God's people. Therefore, confession and repentance of sin was necessary. The holiness of the King makes sinners realize they are sinners. The acknowledgment of sin shows the need for salvation. Salvation is

only granted where there is forgiveness of offenses against God's holiness and righteousness.

So when John thundered out the need for people to bring forth fruits of repentance, he was preaching the good news of the gospel. The good news is that sinners who confess their sins and repent are granted forgiveness of their offenses against God because the Savior Jesus Christ has paid the price to redeem us. That sounds like mercy.

God would use John because He is merciful. The light of God's truth comes to us through His mercy. *Because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high (v.78)*. The sunrise always pictures that which is good. The sun rising after a dark and frightening night is always encouraging.

Many years ago when Hurricane Hugo cut a path of destruction through our state, I went to Sumter to help clean up the mess. I talked to an older couple who were hunkered down in their house that night as multiple tornadoes wreaked havoc all around them. They said that they spent the entire night praying and calling out to God for help. In the morning when the sun rose, they were not even able to get out of their house for trees that had fallen. But they were safe and rejoiced to see daylight.

That is a picture of our world and life without Christ. It is a dark life of fear and foreboding. But Christ, the sunrise, has visited us. The Sunrise is the demonstration of God's tender mercy to us. Because of our sinful nature, we are more pitiable than we can imagine. But God's tender pity toward us is also greater than we can imagine.

The light of God's truth is necessary to guide us. God sent Jesus *to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace (v.79)*. The Sunlight, Jesus Christ, brings light to us who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. We have no hope until God's truth dawns on us. And God's truth never dawns on us until God, in mercy, gives us light and life. And to us whom He has given life through Christ, the Living truth lights our path and guides our feet toward peace with Him.

The light of God's truth is not always communicated the way we expect. Almost like an epilogue we read, *And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel (v.80)*. We rejoice that John brought the truth of God to a world of people sitting in darkness. How

wonderful that in God's plan, he was preparing the way for the Living Truth, Jesus Christ. But he confused the people because he did not teach in the temple and did not preach in the synagogues. John was virtually unknown until he began preaching truth in the wilderness. What an odd plan!

The births of John and Jesus were such an amazing display of God's mercy. These births were the expression of God keeping promises that He had made centuries earlier. These births remind us that God will keep His word. God keeps what He promises because He is merciful. If we have personally received God's mercy, we will have a testimony of praise about His work in our lives.