Praise Be to the Lord

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Y. Joe Kim
yhjoekim@gmail.com

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: [68] "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. [69] He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, [70] as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, [71] that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. [72] Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, [73] the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us [74] that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, [75] in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. [76] And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, [77] to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. [78] By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, [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 1:67-79)

1. Many People Praised President Bush

Last Wednesday, the nation remembered the 41st President of the United States, George H. W. Bush. He was remembered as a faithful, genuine, and loving person. At age 89, President Bush shaved his head to show support for the son of one of his security detail. The two-year-old boy was battling leukemia.

During the eulogy, his son, President George W. Bush, remembered his father as "a genuinely optimistic man." I believe that his optimism is from his faith and trust in the Lord. In today's scripture, we see another optimistic person. His name is Zechariah.

2. Zechariah's Praise and Prophecy

Zechariah was a priest and his wife was named Elizabeth. The couple did not have children and were past their childbearing age. While serving in the temple, the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and tells him that he has been chosen by God to have a son and that their son would be the forerunner for the Messiah. Just as the angel proclaimed, Elizabeth became pregnant with John the Baptist.

In today's scripture, Zechariah praises God not because he has a son but because God remembers His covenant with the Israelites and all the Old Testament prophecies. God promised Abraham that the world would be blessed through Abraham (Genesis 12:3). Zechariah believed that this covenant would

be fulfilled through the Messiah. We need to remember that Jesus is not born yet by that time.

In verse 76 and the following, Zechariah predicts that his son, John the Baptist, would prepare the Messiah's way. How did Zechariah know this? Luke 1:67 says that Zechariah "***was filled with the Holy Spirit***." Zechariah's spiritual eyes were opened by the Holy Spirit. He could see in advance what God would do for his people. That's why Zechariah says, "praise be to the Lord."

3. God Looks Favorably on Us

The Gospel of Luke Chapter One explains how such things happened. Zechariah and Elizabeth were too old to have a child. Elizabeth later says, "***this is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me***" (1:25). Elizabeth recognizes that her pregnancy is only possible because of God's favor. The birth of John the Baptist is a sign of God's grace.

In Luke 1:26 and the following, the angel Gabriel visits a virgin Mary and tells her that she will have a son. Mary later says "***My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant***" (1:47-48). Mary understands her pregnancy as God's favor.

Have you ever felt like God was showing you some kind of great favor? I have experienced this year. Last Sunday 6 people and this morning another 6 people joined the church. I believe that this is a sign of God's favor. It is certainly grace of God.

4. The Response to God's Grace

How do we respond to God's grace? The birth of John the Baptist reminds us of the birth of Samuel. 1 Samuel Chapter One tells us that one day Hannah went to the temple and prayed that if God gives her a son, she would dedicate her son to the Lord. God remembered her prayer and gave her a son. She named him Samuel. When Samuel was old enough, she brought him to the Temple. Hannah dedicated her son Samuel to the Lord. Instead of keeping Samuel for herself, Hannah kept her promise to the Lord.

After my sermon Wanda Crowell, our Stewardship Chair, will talk about a pledge for 2019. What is the definition of stewardship? The definition of stewardship is "the conducting, supervising, or managing of something especially the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care."

When we talk about stewardship, we often just think of giving money to the church. But just like the definition says, stewardship of what God has given us is about taking responsibility and care of the things that we have. This includes money but it is really every thing in our lives such as family, children, church, time, talents, and our life that God has entrusted to us. Yet it is not easy

to share what are entrusted by the Lord. Why not? Probably it is because we have fear that we would need them in the future. So it is hard to be generous givers. Sometime we find generous givers.

5. Serve Him Without Fear

Who can we be generous givers? In verse 74, Zechariah says, "***we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear****."* When we say that we trust and follow God, what we are really saying is that we believe that God will take care of us no matter the situation that might be in front of us. We recognize that God is in control of every aspect in the world. If we believe that God saved us through his son Jesus, we can serve the Lord without fear.

1 Samuel 2:21 says, "***the LORD took note of Hannah; she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters."*** Hannah had previously had no children. But God knew all about Hannah's situation and blessed her with five more children, in addition to her first son Samuel.

If we truly trust that God would provide us with what we need in the future, we can be more generous in our giving. Before we make a pledge for 2019, I hope everyone asks two questions. First, do we believe that God has entrusted us everything we have (Matthew 25:14-30)? Second, do we believe that if we give 10% of everything to God, God will bless us more than we expect?

Malachi 3:7-10 say, "*Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, "How shall we return?"* 8 *Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, "How are we robbing you?" In your tithes and offerings!* 9 *You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you!* 10 *Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing*."

Tithing means returning to God and receiving overflowing blessing. I hope that your pledge would not give you any burden, but joy and even excitement. I pray that you even experience miracles. After my message Jan Landers will share with us her experience of stewardship.

6. Conclusion

As we go through the Advent season, Christmas, and prepare for the new year, Luke 1:67-79 reminds us that God looks favorably on us always. And God wants us to live our lives without fear.

7. Application

In Advent and Christmas, we look towards the coming of the Messiah. How does the world see the signs of Christ? The world sees Christ through his followers. We are called to be followers of Christ. We are filled with the Holy Spirit to live for Christ in our daily lives.

Zechariah saw God's vision when he was filled with the Holy Spirit. God sent the Messiah from the house of David to save his people. Luke 24:47 & 48 say, "***repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations… [48] You are witnesses of these things***." We are called to be witnesses for the Gospel, of Jesus' birth, death and resurrection to all nations. I pray that our words and deeds would be a light to everyone so that many can join us in singing, "***Praise be to the Lord***." Amen.