

Salvation is Here
Luke 1:57-80

Good morning! My name is Dan, and I am one of the pastors here.

In April 1916, a young Irishman named Ernest Shackleton found himself in an impossible situation. He and his crew of 27 men were attempting what no one had completed before -- the 1,800 mile journey across the continent of Antarctica. Unfortunately, Shackleton and his men never even set foot on the continent. The icy, treacherous waters surrounding Antarctica left them shipwrecked and stranded on Elephant Island with only a few small lifeboats and minimal supplies.

Knowing that death was certain if they remained on the island, Shackleton selected 5 men, loaded up a 20-ft lifeboard with a few weeks of supplies, and set out for a nearly 800-mile journey through some of the stormiest seas on the planet in search of help.

The 22 men left on Elephant Island waited. At first they were confident—Shackleton had never let them down before. But as days turned into weeks, and weeks stretched into months, the promise began to feel thin. Each day, the men would climb to high ground, look out to sea, and scan the horizon for any sign of help. But as winter closed in and supplies ran low, it began to look like rescue would not come. Though they tried to stay hopeful, they were worn down by what one crew member described as the “slow corrosion of doubt.”

When help is slow to come, when prayers are slow to be answered, when deliverance gets delayed, it is so easy to be worn down by the slow corrosion of doubt, isn't it?

This morning, we are going to meet once again a man who struggled with doubt. His name is Zechariah, and we were introduced to him two weeks ago, at the beginning of our Advent series. In that story, we heard the angel promise Zechariah that his barren wife, Elizabeth, would conceive and give birth to a son. But Zechariah, worn down over decades by the slow corrosion of doubt, had a hard time believing that this good news could possibly be true.

But as we will see in our time together this morning, something has changed since the angel first came to Zechariah. Something has changed in Zechariah that has brought him from a moment of doubt into a season of faith. And the change that takes place in Zechariah is a change that God wants to see take place in each and everyone of us.

So the question that we are going to ask today is, *How, like Zechariah, might we move from the inevitable moments of doubt into deep and abiding seasons of faith.* The answer, as we will see, has everything to do with the faithfulness of God.

The Baby is Born, the Promise is Fulfilled

So let's jump into our text. We are going to be in the last part of Luke 1, picking up the story in v. 57. Let's read **Luke 1:57-58**.

57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. 58 And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

Right out of the gate, we find that the promise made to Zechariah has been fulfilled! God promised through Gabriel that Elizabeth would have a son, and here that son is born. Against all odds, in the face of the impossible, after decades of barrenness and nine months of pregnancy, the baby is born. God has been faithful to his promise -- and the people notice. Word spreads, and people begin to rejoice at this miraculous birth.

Our Faith and God's Faithfulness

But Zechariah is not mentioned here. Where is he? How will he respond? Let's keep reading.

Luke 1:59-64

59 And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, 60 but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." 61 And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." 62 And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. 63 And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. 64 And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.

Remember that Zechariah's first response to the angel was one of doubt -- *give me a sign to help me believe*. The angel did, but that sign came by way of rebuke -- Zechariah would be unable to speak until the baby was born. Now, nine months have come and gone. The baby has been born, but still Zechariah is unable to speak. And we don't know where his heart is at. Does he still doubt? Or does he have faith?

But then Zechariah, still unable to speak, takes a tablet and in writing confirms what his wife has spoken, *His name is John*. And immediately his speech is restored, and he begins to praise God.

How is it that Zechariah moves from a moment of doubt to a season of faith? How is it that he moves from questioning God to praising him?

It is because Zechariah is reminded in no uncertain terms that God is faithful. God is faithful. And he knows it because God made a promise -- a promise to do the impossible -- and he kept his word. Zechariah believes God, and He responds with faith and obedience.

Notice here that Zechariah's faith is not a prerequisite for God's faithfulness. God does not wait to see how Zechariah will respond before he chooses to be faithful. The baby comes before Zechariah names him. God fulfilled his promise even before Zechariah demonstrates faith.

And this is exactly what God does for us. God's faithfulness does not wait for our faith. If anyone ever tells you that God hasn't answered your prayers because you don't have enough faith, *do not believe them*. God does not evaluate your heart and your mind to discern whether you have

enough faith for him to be faithful to you. No. First, God is faithful. He comes to us, and then he asks us to trust him.

Make no mistake, God is looking for faith. He desires and even demands our faith. But he does not wait to be faithful until we have faith. He doesn't delay his faithfulness because of our doubts. Rather, God's faithfulness deepens our faith. It matures our faith. It refines it and strengthens it.

So if you want to grow in faith, begin by asking yourself the question, *How has God been faithful to me?* How has God been faithful to me? Notice, recall, remember all the ways that God has been faithful to you. Praise God for those things. And as you do that, you will be able to move from a moment of doubt into a season of faith.

When Zechariah responds with such great faith, the story begins to spread. Look at the way people respond. **Luke 1:65-66:**

65 And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, 66 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.

Zechariah's faith -- and even more so God's faithfulness -- got the neighbors talking! But this is not just water cooler gossip. *Hey, did you hear about old lady, Elizabeth?* They aren't just marveling as Zechariah's decision. *Can you believe what they named that kid?* It's more than that. People are wondering what this child, this miraculous child, is going to become. They laid these things up in their hearts. Pondering. Meditating. Processing. They know something is happening, but they just don't know what.

Looking Through Eyes of Faith

Zechariah, however, understands more of what is going on. Look at **Luke 1:67-70**

67 And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,

*68 "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people
69 and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
70 as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,*

With the eyes of faith and the illumination of the Spirit, Zechariah understands what is going on. As prophets often do, Zechariah speaks about things that have not yet happened with so much certainty that it is as if they have already happened.

What is he so confident about? The Lord has visited and redeemed his people. He is talking about the coming birth of Jesus Christ. And in Jesus, he says, God will visit and redeem his people. And that right there is the gospel in a nutshell. In Jesus, God has visited and redeemed his people.

God didn't stay far off. He didn't come up with a solution to the sin of the world that involved him sitting back in his arm chair sipping margaritas while something happened out there. No, he visited. He came to us. He took on flesh and entered the mess for us. Because that is the whole point: God wants to be with us. Did you know that?

Last week, my parents were in town. They live in Minnesota, and they don't usually come to visit us this time of year, especially because we will be visiting them in just a few weeks over the New Year. But they came to visit because they want to be with us in our space. They want to be connected to our lives. They want to see our kids' school and come to our church and have conversations with our friends -- not because they love those things but because they love us and want to know us and want to be with us.

God visited us in Jesus because he loves and wants to know us and to be with us.

But he didn't just come for a visit. He came on a rescue mission. He came to save us. He came to redeem us.

And notice this: as Zechariah praises God for visiting and redeeming us in Jesus, he casts the incarnation as an act of God's *faithfulness*.

In v. 69, he says, "God has raised up for us a horn of salvation in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his prophets from of old."

Zechariah is reflecting on the faithfulness of God to his people over the millennia. Promise. Fulfillment. Promise. Fulfillment. All throughout Scripture we see this. Each new act of faithfulness by God is not viewed as a one-off -- it's not viewed as an anomaly or as an isolated incident. Rather, each new act of God's faithfulness is viewed as a part of God's long history of covenant faithfulness to his people.

What's the point? God has a track record. He has a track record of making and keeping promises to his people. And if you struggle with doubt as Zechariah did -- if you want to grow in faith as all of the great saints throughout history have -- then it is not enough to just recognize how God has been faithful to you -- how God has answered your prayers, or showed up in your life, or visited and redeemed you. You might start by recognizing God's faithfulness to you. But if you stop there, you will not have a resilient faith. No, you need to step back and you need to recognize that God has a track record -- a track record of making and keeping promises to his people.

And nowhere do we see that more clearly than in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Savior of the world. God didn't leave us in our sin. He didn't abandon us as a lost cause. He came to us. He became one of us. He came on a rescue mission to save us.

Salvation from Our Enemies

What did he save us from? Zechariah tells us as he continues.

Luke 1:71-75:

71 that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
72 to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
73 the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us
74 that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

The salvation that Jesus brings is salvation from the hands of our enemies.

Now, we can't hear that from the mouth of a Jewish priest in the first century without hearing salvation from Rome -- salvation from our oppressors, from our earthly enemies. All throughout the Old Testament we see Israel longing for peace, justice, and freedom for their earthly enemies.

The language in v. 74 in particular calls us back to the Exodus from Egypt. When Moses asks Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go, it is so that they might worship God in the wilderness. Here, Zechariah sees a coming freedom from the hands of our enemies that *we might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him.*

A second Exodus is in view here, and you can't have a second Exodus without freedom from earthly enemies. There is no doubt here that Zechariah longed for that.

But as we keep reading, we see that Zechariah had something more in mind as well. As his prophecy continues, he begins to focus on the role of his son, John, and the role that he will play as a preparer. Look at what he says:

Luke 1:76-79

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
in the forgiveness of their sins,
78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
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.”

So John, his child, will prepare the way for the Lord and his salvation, which he defines here as *the forgiveness of sins*.

Salvation from the hand of our enemies, then, must mean something more than just freedom from earthly enemies. And indeed it does. Jesus comes to bring salvation from our spiritual enemies! Salvation from sin. Deliverance from evil. Victory over Satan and death.

And yet, when we zoom out and see the whole picture of salvation, we see that Jesus also comes to bring freedom from our earthly enemies.

The issue, however, is one of timing. When does Jesus bring this salvation?

Ten years ago, Linzy and I were driving through Nebraska into Colorado. If you have ever driven through Nebraska, you know that it is FLAT. But there comes a point as you enter Colorado where, *boom*, you see the Rocky Mountains in front of you. But the interesting thing when you see a mountain range from a distance is that while you can see the peaks, you can't necessarily tell which peaks are closer, which are further, and how much space there is between them.

As Zechariah, with eyes of faith and full of Holy Spirit, looks into the future to this salvation that Jesus would bring, he sees the peaks -- freedom from earthly enemies, freedom from spiritual enemies, the defeat of human oppressors, the death of Satan, deliverance from injustice, deliverance from sin. The issue is not what kind of salvation Jesus will bring, but when he will bring that salvation.

And the answer comes in the mystery of already-not yet. The kingdom of God is already here, but it is not yet here in full.

Jesus has already defeated Satan, but Satan still has some power in this world. Jesus has already paid the price for our sin and broken its power over us, but we will still struggle with sin. Jesus came to make the lame walk and the blind see and to set the captives free, but there will still be sickness, injury, disease, and injustice until Jesus comes back again.

But could we, with the eyes of faith and full of the Holy Spirit, look into the future, taking into account the God's long history of faithfulness to his people, and say with Zechariah, "We have been delivered by Jesus from the hands of our enemies so that we might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days."

That is what we have been made for. That is what we have been saved for. To worship and serve God without fear in holiness and in righteousness.

Salvation is Here

Ernest Shackleton left 22 men on Elephant Island in April 1916. May rolled around. Then June. Then July. The slow decay of doubt was wearing down any sense of hope for those men.

Then finally, after four and half months on Elephant Island, they spotted a small vessel making its way through the icy waters. From the boat, Shackleton called out to his men, "Are you all well?"

One man shouted back, "All safe. All well!"

Against all odds, after months of silence, the promise had been kept. The rescue mission was complete. Salvation had arrived.

We are here today to declare that salvation has arrived. In Jesus, the rescue mission of God has reached its culmination. We have been delivered from the hands of our enemies. Our sins have been forgiven. And we are now free to worship and serve God in holiness and righteousness.

As we continue to worship Jesus this morning, we are going to take communion.