

December 8, 2024
The Second Sunday in Advent
Luke 1:67-79
Luke 3:1-6
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Dawn

We don't always use the Psalm during our Advent worship services. Sometimes, I decide to leave it out because of other things that are going on during the worship service.

I guess an argument could be made that we're not using the Psalm today. Because today, in the place of the Psalm, we have what's called Psalmody, one of the non-Psalm songs in the Bible, also called a canticle. Canticles are used in many different ways in worship, including, in the place of the Psalm.

Today in place of the Psalm we have the song of Zechariah, the song that the aging Zechariah sang over his newborn son, who he had just named John.

I decided that we would use the Psalmody today for two reasons. One was because we're going to spend the next two weeks in the company of John the Baptist, and I thought it would be important for us to know a little bit more about where he came from. The other reason was that I wanted us to stand in liturgical solidarity with those who worship at our Zoom service every week.

The liturgy we use for the Zoom service is morning prayer and every week after the gospel reading and sermon, we read what is today's psalmody, today's canticle, in response to the read and preached word. In our service this morning, we're even reading the canticle or Psalmody in the same way as we do it in the zoom service, with a verse of the canticle serving as a refrain for the assembly.

Let me read a little bit of it to you to see if you can figure out why it's the assigned canticle for Morning Prayer:

And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High,

for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way,
to give God's people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.

In the tender compassion of our God
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to
guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:68-79)

Did anything stand out for you to explain why this would be something we
would be told to read in the morning? How about: *The dawn from on high shall
break upon us to shine on those who dwell in darkness.* (Luke 1:78b-79a)

In some ways, this canticle is telling us good morning. A new day has dawned
and the light of God shines upon us.

Every day we are invited to start the day in praise and celebration of the light
of God shining on us, a new day for us to experience the mercy, the compassion of
God.

Back when we were only holding worship on Zoom, back in 2020 and early
2021, I sometimes signed my family up to be the Designated Responders for Zoom
worship. That means that they would read the assembly parts on behalf of the
congregation, unmuted, while others participating in the Zoom service would offer
the responses still on mute, so that we didn't get any strange Zoom feedback.

So, there they were, the five of them, Britton, Abigail, Julia, John, and Cyrus,
reading the canticle, the Song of Zechariah responsively, back and forth with me.
Only they didn't do it the way that most people do it in our Zoom services. We
usually say, "In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall
break upon us." (Luke 1:78) Nice and calm.

But my family said it like this. "IN THE TENDER COMPASSION OF OUR
GOD THE DAWN FROM ON HIGH SHALL BREAK UPON US!"

And they would get louder and more enthusiastic every time they said it. Until they were really shouting by the last emphatic declaration “THE DAWN FROM ON HIGH SHALL BREAK UPON US!”

This was not a pink glow of dawn peeking over the horizon.

This was the sun rising in glory, illuminating the world. Not something to be mumbled. Not something hinted at or barely seen. This was a definitive, defiant breaking in of the love and compassion of God. THE DAWN FROM ON HIGH BREAKS UPON US!

And yet, does it really?

Because these words were first spoken by Zechariah. Zechariah was a priest of a local religion who lived on the edges of the Roman Empire, in a hardly subdued province, where only the strong presence of the military held the Pax Roman together, where people chafed under Roman rule, but didn't have the strength, the power to fight back.

Zechariah was an old man and his wife, Elizabeth, was an old woman. They had no children and had given up the hope of having children. Elizabeth kept their home and Zechariah did his duties as a priest, and they lived in peace with each other, with the world and with God.

Until the day when Zechariah received a visit from the angel of the Lord. The angel of the Lord came to Zechariah when he was at work in the Temple, working in the Sanctuary of the Lord, the most holy place, where he would have been alone, with no one to witness this angel visitation.

The angel had some amazing news for Zechariah. “Do not be afraid, Zechariah,” the angel said, “for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord....” (Luke 1:13-15a)

Talk about good news for Zechariah and Elizabeth. The dawn from on high breaking upon them.

But it was such unexpected, unlikely good news, that Zechariah wondered how it could be possible. He doubted the word of the angel. He questioned the angel. How could God do this impossible thing for him and his wife, old as they were?

And the angel responded, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." (Luke 1:19-20)

Elizabeth became pregnant and in nine months, she gave birth to a healthy son. Zechariah remained mute until the child was born, until he followed the angel's command and named his son, John, by writing his name on a writing tablet. After John was named, Zechariah's voice returned to him and this song, this canticle poured out of him,

Blessed are you, Lord, the God of Israel,
you have come to your people and set them free.
You have raised up for us a mighty Savior,
born of the house of your servant David.
Through your holy prophets,
you promised of old to save us from our enemies,
from the hands of all who hate us,
to show mercy to our forebears,
and to remember your holy covenant.
This was the oath you swore to our father Abraham:
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
free to worship you without fear,

holy and righteous before you, all the days of our life.

And you, child, [you, newborn baby, John] shall be called the prophet of the Most High,

for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way,
to give God's people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.

In the tender compassion of our God

the dawn from on high shall break upon us,

to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to
guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:68-79)

John was to be a prophet, who would prepare the way of the Lord.

And yet, this was a little baby, born to an obscure and relatively powerless couple, born in an obscure, out of the way, backwoods place, to a relatively powerless people, who lived under the dominion of the mighty Roman Empire.

So, which was it?

Was THE DAWN FROM ON HIGH BREAKING or was dawn just a barely observable pinkening of the distant horizon?

Look. Can you see it? The dawn from on high is breaking upon us.

“You, child shall be called the prophet of the of the most high.” (Luke 1:76)

That’s what John’s father told him on the day he was born.

And that’s what our gospel reading tells us.

The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord...’ (Luke 3:2b-4c)

Perhaps this was the dawn from on high breaking in.

And yet, before we hear about John, son of Zechariah, in today’s gospel reading, we hear about the powers of this world,

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...” (Luke 3:1-2a)

Do you recognize any of those names. One of them, Herod, is going to play a big part in John’s story, and four of them, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Annas, and Caiaphas are going to play a big part in Jesus’ story, the one for whom John prepared the way.

In fact, four of them, Pilate, Herod, Annas, and Caiaphas, are going to be the representatives of the powers of this world that are arrayed against the inbreaking of God’s kingdom proclaimed by John and embodied in Jesus. They will represent the kingdoms of this world set in opposition to the kingdom of God. They will act on behalf of those with worldly power who want to keep power for themselves, rather than laying down their power, their glory, their wealth at the throne of God.

What could lowly John the Baptist, John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, who had a grand total of zero worldly power against the powerful of this world, emperors, governors, kings, high priests?

And yet, listen. There’s a voice, crying out in the wilderness. Look, in the distance, in the tender compassion of our God, breaks upon us. It might be a distant lightening of the sky, but look, it’s getting brighter.

When Britton and our kids were designated responders read the gospel canticle the way that they did, “IN THE TENDER COMPASSION OF OUR GOD, THE DAWN FROM ON HIGH WILL BREAK UPON US” they weren’t wrong. They were just early. They were just anticipating Advent. They were anticipating the coming of Jesus, the coming of our king, the indisputable breaking in of the dawn, the light, the kingdom of God.

Right now, we live in a time when those words are our hope. They are what we can see off in the distance, if we can teach ourselves to listen to the prophets in the wilderness. If we can train our eyes to see beyond the bright lights of empires to the dawning of God’s new day, “in the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us.”

But our Advent prayer is what we whisper, what we see in the distance, what we glimpse with weary eyes, what we hope will come to us soon, in power and glory and might and clarity. We pray and, like John the Baptist, we prepare the way for the coming of our king. We live in the hope that “IN THE TENDER COMPASSION OF OUR GOD THE DAWN FROM ON HIGH WILL BREAK UPON US!” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. Lord Jesus, quickly come.