Songs of HOPE

Isaiah 40:1-11 Kimby Young

Luke 1:67-79 December 3, 2023

I cannot hear this reading from Isaiah without hearing my mother’s beautiful voice singing part of it. For the first forty years of my life, she sang those verses as arranged in Handel’s *Messiah* every single year and usually several times a year, and when I got old enough, I joined her in singing these verses. I can’t hear those words any other way but a song. I can’t just read that passage. It is a song that must be sung. It is a song that brings back to me every note of love my mother ever sang, and every joyful positive hope-filled moment of the Advent season. God will comfort us. God will carry us. God will always love us. There are a lot of songs like that for me. Probably there are for you - Songs that send you immediately into another time and place; Songs that remind you of certain people; Songs that instantly flood you with emotions and expressions and energy; Songs that say exactly what you are feeling or thinking; Songs that capture the season; Songs that strengthen your faith and pull you forward on life’s journey.

And this season is filled with music. Hundreds of songs flood the airwaves and the elevators. Some people find them irritating. I frankly can’t get enough. In two weeks, we will hear the cantata in worship called “Songs of Joy.” That title inspired this sermon and next week’s sermon about Songs from scripture for this season of Advent.

Today the singers are Isaiah the prophet, and Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, husband of Elizabeth. Isaiah, preaching to the exiles, sings a song of hope and restoration. Zechariah’s song captures the moment when Zechariah responds to the birth of his only son, John, who would become the great New Testament prophet pointing the way to the Christ. Zechariah responds with joy and gratitude as most fathers do, but he also responds with great faith, celebrating the God of our ancestors, recalling the ancient promises of justice and mercy, and looking forward in hope to the great new salvation God was about to deliver.

I’m going to concentrate on the song of Zechariah today. In many ways it echoes the song of Isaiah. There are really three sections to the passage.

In the first line, Zechariah praises God – “Praise be to the Lord God of Israel,”

Then Zechariah explains why he praises God – “because God has come and has redeemed God’s people.” Or as another translation says “for God has looked favorably on God’s people.”  
The next few lines remember moments out of our faith tradition.

“God has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David,” and he lists a few of the ways God has saved God’s people from Abraham down through the ages. 73

The interesting thing about Zechariah’s song is that instead of just rehearsing all that God has done, as many of the ancient songs did, pointing out God’s faithfulness in the Covenant, Zechariah also points out the responsibilities of the people. Verses 74 and 75 say “to enable us to serve God without fear in holiness and righteousness before God all our days.”

So Zechariah hooks us in here. Yes, we can rehearse the past. Yes we can remember the good old days of how great First Presbyterian Church once was. But Zechariah says don’t stop there. Remember the past – but with that, remember your responsibility in bringing that forward. It is our job to build on our heritage, and to build even greater community for the future. And Zechariah says we can do it, because God is with us and for us. You can tell Zechariah is the father of a prophet – there is a challenge as well as a blessing in his song. Zechariah reminds us that we have a part in the covenant God has made with God’s people for generation upon generation. We are not just passive recipients, but active participants in God’s promises. We have a job to do. We have a response to make. We must serve God. That leads forward to the final verses – a specific call for this specific time at the birth of his son and the coming of the Messiah.

“And you, my child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
   for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,   
 to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.   
Because of the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,   
 to shine on or give light to those living in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
   to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

These last four verses of this passage are a deeply personal song. Zechariah moves from abstract praise of God and repetition of faith story to a personal message of hope given in love from Zechariah to John, from father to son, from priest to prophet, from one generation to another. It is more than just words - it is a call and a challenge. You my child, you my son, you my beloved. You will be the one who introduces the Christ to the world. You will be THE prophet of the most high. You will prepare the way of the Lord. You will point other people toward God. You, my child, will be able to offer God’s grace to everyone you meet, to all the world.

Wow, don’t forget - these are words Zechariah is speaking to a newborn baby. You will introduce God’s grace to the world. Did Zechariah see that in that little baby face? Did Zechariah hear that in John’s little baby cries? Did Zechariah know how special, how important, how wonderful this boy would be?

I would say, probably, yes. But you know, I think any parent will swear the same thing. When you see that little face for the first time – don’t you see all the wonderful possibilities? Don’t you just know this is the most special baby in the world? I do and I’m not even a parent. Just looking around this room – at our beautiful babies. And I would include the babies of every age. There is so much possibility before us. Every beautiful baby expression, yes, even every little cry is a wonder and a miracle. And looking into that face – the face of each child of God – we know, anything is possible. God can do ANYTHING thru these precious gifts.

And that is the truth of Zechariah’s song, Zechariah’s blessing and challenge to John, and to us. That song is a song for everyone born. Zechariah hopes for his beloved child, that he will know the joy of serving God and sharing God’s grace with others. You are invited into the same miraculous journey. You are given the same blessing. You are empowered by the same God. You are able to introduce God’s love to the world. Sing God’s song as God has sung it to you. All of us are encouraged. Just like John the Baptist. All of us are called – to prepare the way of the Lord, Jesus Christ; to prepare others to meet Jesus; to introduce others to God as known in the love of Jesus, to share your faith and the abundance of all that God offers, to celebrate God’s love, to sing of God’s mercy, to dance in God’s light, to guide our feet into the way of peace. Sing. Sing people of God. Sing like Zechariah. Sing like Isaiah. Sing like nobody before you and everyone who has ever loved. Sing your song. Sing to God. Sing with God’s grace. Sing of Jesus who saves us with love. Sing to bring hope to all who hear. SING. And be blessed. Alleluia. Amen.

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;

make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;

the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together,

for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

A voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?”

All flesh is grass; their constancy is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers; the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;

surely the people are grass.

The grass withers; the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news;

lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news;

lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”

See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him;

his reward is with him and his recompense before him.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms

and carry them in his bosom and gently lead the mother sheep.

Luke 1:67-79

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his child David,

as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors

and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,

to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,

might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness in his presence all our days.

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

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.

Because of the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,

to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the way of peace.”