

30 November 2022
Advent 1 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Blessing of Being Visited”
Text: Genesis 18:1-14; Luke 1:57-79

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

The *Benedictus*. The words spoken by Zechariah when his son John was born. For nine months he had been unable to speak. For nine months his tongue had been bound by God, because he did not believe that God could or would give him and his up-til-now-barren wife Elizabeth a son in their old age. For nine months, Zechariah thought about what to say when his tongue was finally loosed and he could speak again. And he spoke this, the *Benedictus*. Words that praise God, telling of how He was now fulfilling the words of the prophets, doing what He promised. And one of the first words he used here to describe this was *visited*. ***Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.***

If you've been in the hospital, or laid up at home, or isolated in a pandemic, you know how nice it is to get visitors. People in prison, the elderly in nursing facilities, long for visitors. It is still not good for man - or woman - to be alone. We need each other. God created us to be in community - with Him and with each other. This time of year, visiting is front and center on many people's minds. Thanksgiving weekend is the busiest time of the year for traveling and visiting. At Christmas we like to visit friends and family, have open houses and parties. We know this is a good thing.

And yet what God has brought together, sin separates. I remember when I was young and there was a knock on the door, we kids would rush to see who could answer the door, excited about who was visiting us. Now a knock on the door brings feelings of dread - what are they selling, are they going to try to scam me. Many people won't even answer the door anymore. Gone are the days when people would stop by unannounced, just for a visit. Hospitality, taking time out of your day for someone, is much a thing of the past. We're too busy. Send a text instead. I'll see it on your social media feed. That might be more efficient, but it's not better. We've lost something. Something valuable, something precious. Visiting is personal. Visiting means *you matter*.

So when Zechariah says that ***God has visited and redeemed his people***, we shouldn't skip over that too quickly. That's a significant thing.

We heard the story tonight of when God visited Abraham. Abraham was thrilled to have visitors. He ran to them when he saw them and considered it an honor to host them. He

gifted them with not just a snack, but a feast with cakes of fine flour and a fattened calf. But in this it was Abraham who truly received a gift. For when God visits, He brings life. And He did. The time had come for the son promised to Abraham to be born. It would be within the next year. It did not matter that he and Sarah were old. It did not matter that up-til-now Sarah was barren. God visited to bring life, and life they would have.

So it was also in the days of Zechariah. *But God did not visit Zechariah.* That was an angel, the angel Gabriel, sent by God with His powerful Word. A Word that brought life. Elizabeth's womb would come to life, she would conceive, and in nine months bear a son they would name John, a name which means *the Lord has shown favor.*

But Zechariah was not wrong when He spoke the words of the Benedictus, that ***God had visited his people.*** He knew that the birth of his son meant this. That the birth of his son was a sign that God was now visiting His people, that the Messiah was here. For his son was the promised forerunner. For ***you, child*** - the child old Zechariah never thought he would hold in his arms! - ***you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.*** Which means the Lord was following close behind. In fact, the Lord was only three months from His own birth in Bethlehem. And this visiting of the Lord would bring life. Life for us. Life for the outcast, the sinner, the leper. Life for all ***who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.***

Which means life for us. For that's us. The church is now being cast out more and more from a world that doesn't want the Word of God or those who believe it and live by it. We are sinners, infected from head-to-toe with that spiritual leprosy. We are the ones sitting in the darkness of the sin and evil of our world, and shrouded under the shadow of death. We need the life the visiting of the Lord brings.

That's why we always start the season of Advent with the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, with the crowds of people who excitedly rushed out like children to greet their visiting king. We join them. Because He is visiting us with life. Life that would come with His death on the cross. His death as the outcast. His death with our sin and spiritual leprosy. His death in the darkness. But His death to break the bonds of death and rise from death. To, as the psalmist says, turn our mourning into dancing (Psalm 30:11), our darkness into light, our sadness into joy. The Lord visits and we receive His gifts.

The thing about visiting, though, is that it's not permanent. Visitors come and go. They stay only for a short time and then the time comes for them to go back home. Often we wish they would stay longer. So, too, with Jesus . . . *in a sense.* His ministry here lasted only some 33 years, and then was His ascension, returning to the Father. But though His *visible* presence was no longer, He did not leave us orphans (John 14:18). *I am with you always,* He told His disciples (Matthew 28:20). He sent His Holy Spirit. And then, too, He promised to return, *to visit us again.* Next time in glory. And in that visitation, not to enter our homes, but for us to enter His - and not for a visit, but to dwell with Him there

forever.

That is what filled Zechariah, who began with such great doubt, with such great joy! Yes, he rejoiced that he and Elizabeth would finally have a son. Yes, he rejoiced when that son was born. But as he realized through nine months of silence, the greatest joy he had was that God was now visiting His people. That the long-promised and long-awaited Messiah was now here. The son God's people had been waiting for far longer than he had been hoping for a son.

That is our joy, too. For God in His Son and through the Spirit has visited us and given us life and joy in Him. So we too

Sing praise to the God of Israel!

Sing praise for His visitation!

Redeeming His people from their sin,

Accomplishing [our] salvation,

Upraising a mighty horn within

The house of His servant David! (LSB #936 v. 1)

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.