

1 December 2010
Advent 1 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Zechariah: Rejoicing Father”

Text: Zechariah 3:14-17; Luke 1:5-23, 57-79

Zechariah never thought this day would come. Not every priest got the honor of serving in the Temple in Jerusalem. There were many priestly divisions and many priests within each division. It was likely this was the only time Zechariah would fulfill this duty, and so it was a day of great joy and awe for him.

Zechariah never thought this day would come. *When he would have a son!* Although he and Elizabeth had been praying for this, they were old now. The days for begetting a child had past. But on this day of joy and awe, when he had been given the honor of burning the incense in the Lord's house, Zechariah receives a second gift that increased his joy. The Lord has heard his prayer, his begging, Gabriel says. They will have a son. And not just any son, but one who will be great, who will serve the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, and prepare the way for the Lord.

Well, the news is almost too great for poor old Zechariah. The awe of the Temple, the appearance of an angel, news of a son - *how can this be?* Who can blame him for asking? But for his unbelief, for all that seemed too good to be true, he will have to remain silent. His tongue will be held in bondage. For nine long months, while his wife is carrying their son, he will have to carry the words he so longs to speak but will not be able. This Word *from* God, this Word *of* God, this *joy* from God, will live in him and grow in him, for nine long months.

And as those months slowly passed, it probably seemed to Zechariah like this day would never come! But come it did, for the Word of the Lord is always fulfilled. And eight days after Elizabeth gives birth, and they bring their son to be circumcised, they give him his God-given name: John, which means, *the Lord has shown favor*. And Zechariah is finally able to break forth from his silence! His tongue is set free from its bondage and he breaks forth in good news of great joy. God has shown favor - not just to an old man and an old woman, but to all men. ***For He has remembered His covenant. He has raised up a horn of salvation. He is coming to deliver his people.*** And . . . oh yes! ***And you child***, shall play a part in all this. In this great and joyous work of the Lord. Its almost as if, in breaking forth in joy over the work and coming of the Lord, Zechariah momentarily forgets his son! But no; or, at least, not for long. This son is too important: to him, and to God.

You know this joy of Zechariah. Maybe at the birth of a child, or some other great and joyous time in your life. Perhaps for you, too, you had to wait for a long time, and it seemed as if that day - and joy - would never come.

But it is not of *your* joy that I would like you to think tonight. But rather, **that the joy of father Zechariah over his son gives us a picture of the joy of God over you.** For so we were told tonight by the prophet Zephaniah: ***The Lord your God is in your midst . . . he will rejoice over you with gladness; . . . he will exult over you with loud singing.***

Think about that! *You are the object of God's joy.* You are the child he has longed for. But not just longed for, but sent His own Son to die for. So that you could be His own. You may not think you're anything special, but your Father in heaven does. And like old Zechariah in the Temple, God takes you up in His arms and rejoices over you.

When did He do that? When you were baptized. When God's own Son, Jesus, was baptized in the Jordan, the voice of the Father sounded forth in joy from heaven: ***You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased*** (Luke 3:22). And when you are baptized into Christ Jesus, and made a son of God in the Son of God, those words are then spoken in joy to you as well. With you, too, God is well pleased. He rejoices over you.

But not only then, but also every time you repent of your sins and return to your Father like the prodigal son and receive His forgiveness, there is great rejoicing in heaven (Luke 15:7, 31-32). Because God created you to be His child. God created you to dwell with Him. Like John, God has great plans for you. And so when you depart from Him in sin, there is no joy in heaven. But when you return from your unbelief, there is forgiveness. And you are set free from *your* bondage - your bondage to sin, and therefore to death and the devil. For as the prophet Zephaniah said: ***The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies.***

And what does that mean for you, then? Joy! The joy of Zechariah. The joy of the Lord. For again, as Zephaniah told us: ***Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!***

And perhaps it is at Christmas that we see all this joy come together, as God and angels, Mary and Joseph, shepherds and wise men, and you and me, rejoice in the gift of a Son. As we rejoice that *the Lord has shown favor* to us. That He has remembered His covenant. That He has raised up the promised Seed of David. And that in this small one, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, He had come to deliver us from our bondage. No wonder there is such joy at Christmas.

So as we continue in this Advent season, like Zechariah, let this Word of God dwell and grow within you, until you, too, break forth in joy over the birth of a Son. A very special Son. And know that even as you rejoice, your Father in heaven is rejoicing over you.

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