

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

68 *“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,*
because he has come and has redeemed his people.
69 *He has raised up a horn*
of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
70 *(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),*
71 *salvation from our enemies*
and from the hand of all who hate us—
72 *to show mercy to our fathers*
and to remember his holy covenant,
73 *the oath he swore to our father Abraham:*
74 *to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,*
and to enable us to serve him without fear
75 *in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*

76 *And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;*
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
77 *to give his people the knowledge of salvation*
through the forgiveness of their sins,
78 *because of the tender mercy of our God,*
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
79 *to shine on those living in darkness*
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.” (Luke 1:67-79)

Come as the Dayspring from on High

I’m not a morning person. Ever since I took over as acting principal, I’ve been trying to convince our teachers that we’d all be better off if we had second shift school. Classes could run from say 2 to 8 o’clock. That way, we’d all get to sleep in. But I can’t get them to go for it. So every morning, we have to be here at 8 or earlier. I really hate it in the winter time because I hate getting out of bed before the sun comes up. So this time of year, when I have to be here that early, I’m always glad when it gets light. I’m not the only one who feels that way, even if most of you aren’t quite as anti-morning as I am.

Sunrise lies at the heart of our lesson this evening. We have before us the Song of Zechariah. Zechariah was the father of John the Baptist and before his wife even was pregnant, God sent an angel to tell him that he was going to have a son. But Zechariah had trouble believing that promise because he and his wife Elizabeth were too old to have kids. So Gabriel took away his power of speech until the promise came true. Sure enough, Elizabeth conceived and nine months later, John was born. When God restored the power of speech to him, the Holy Spirit came on him in power and Zechariah sang this song of praise.

At its heart was verse 78 which says that **“by the tender mercy of our God ... the rising sun will come to us from heaven.”** This year during our midweek Advent services, we’re using the hymn “O Come, O Come Emanuel” to guide us to specific promises of the coming Christ. Verse three points us to Zechariah’s song. It says, “O Come, O Dayspring from on high.” What does that mean? I actually had to look it up. Dayspring means dawn. That’s the word the King James Version of the Bible used here so that’s the way the hymn was written. So that’s the way we’ll say it tonight: **Come as the Dayspring from on High.**

I.

Whether you like “dayspring” or “the rising sun,” the point is the end of the night. The Bible uses that imagery a great deal. Jesus is the Light of the world. God taught his Old Testament people to view their world as trapped in thick darkness until he would bring that light to them. What was the darkness of the Old

Testament world? Zechariah's song talks about the promises God gave – with Christ, God raised up a horn of salvation in the house of David and that God had sworn an oath to their father Abraham. God had promised these ancestors that Jesus was coming. When God taught Zechariah that his son was going to have a role in bringing those promises to their fulfillment, Zechariah called that “showing mercy to our fathers.”

So what was the darkness? Ignorance. They didn't know how long they were going to have to wait. They didn't know how God was going to fit all the pieces together. God told them a lot about what was coming. Jesus would be a descendant of King David. He would be born in Bethlehem. He would bring light to Galilee. He would be humble. He would suffer and die and rise. For us, it's relatively easy to fit those pieces into the life of Christ. But imagine what it was like to be an Old Testament believer waiting for a King and a Savior who would die. How was that going to work? God told them to simply trust him and he kept feeding them details and he didn't condemn them for what he didn't tell them. But Peter says that even the prophets themselves had to examine those prophecies with the greatest care to understand what God was really saying. But when Jesus came, it all fell into place.

The other part of the darkness that Zechariah talks about is a little more concrete: their enemies. It wasn't easy to be God's chosen people in an unbelieving world. God set them apart. He made them obey all kinds of special dietary laws and purity laws that no one else in the world obeyed. The Romans used soldiers from conquered peoples in their armies and it helped those peoples reconcile themselves to being part of the empire. But they couldn't use Jews because their religious restrictions couldn't be met in the Roman army. That caused a lot of people to hate them. And the Jews just had a long history of warfare with the people around them.

But the enemy list is longer than that. In the Garden of Eden, God said that when the Savior came, he would make the devil our enemy again. Before we have faith, God is our enemy. We're on the devil's side. But once we become the people of God, then the devil is our enemy. He hates us. He does everything he can to make us suffer in this world. And he tries day and night to destroy our faith so that we suffer with him in hell forever. That was true in the Old Testament, too. Israel's enemies were all those unbelievers who raged against their special laws and the devil and his evil angels who wanted to drag them down to hell.

But Jesus came to rescue them. The light dawned to put an end to the tyranny of darkness. Jesus came and he died and paid for the sin and unbelief that we were born with. He died and paid for every sinful choice and every sinful word and every sinful thought and feeling and desire we've ever been guilty of. Then he rose and freed us from slavery to hell and the devil. We are free from guilt, free from punishment, free even from death itself.

We will go home to heaven, knowing that means that we have the light of Christ. But we have it in a world that's wrapped in thick darkness. What darkness do we face here? Jesus spoke of wars and rumors of wars and famines and earthquakes and upheavals. That is all true today. Jesus spoke of the love of most growing cold and it is so hard to see Christian churches turning their backs on what God says. He also warned us that if his enemies hated him, they will hate us. If they persecuted him, they will persecute us. We face the same enemies Israel faced: the devil and all those unbelievers who line up behind him. But Jesus won when he died and rose. And we won, too. Now, he protects us from the power of the devil and from every enemy of Christ. You do have to understand that correctly. Jesus may let us suffer here. He may let our enemies torment and even kill us here. But even that he does to bring us home. Even when life hurts, he is working to keep our faith strong. Jesus is the light of the world and every day that we live in this sin darkened world we pray, **come as the Dayspring from on high. Bring light to the darkness of this world.**

II.

For Zechariah, having a son in his old age meant the healing of the greatest disappointment of his life. I'm sure that he and Elizabeth had prayed for years for a child but God didn't give them one. He probably experienced the kind of wistful longing that even a believer feels when he sees the blessings he most desired given only to others. So it amazes me that Zechariah's song doesn't focus on finally having a baby. The song is all about Christ. Even when it mentions John, it focuses on his relationship to the coming Savior. I think that says a lot about the faith of Zechariah. He could receive the thing he wanted most in life and still see that there was an even greater blessing coming: his Savior.

You can imagine Zechariah holding his son when he says, **“And you, my child, will be called a 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.” John was going to be the last Old Testament prophet. Now, I realize he actually lived during the New Testament. But he was the last prophet to come before Jesus, the last messenger God sent to repeat the promise of the Messiah. The big difference between him and all the prophets whose books actually are in the Old Testament is how close in time to Jesus John really was. This wasn't Isaiah writing seven hundred years before the baby was born. John was born only six months before Jesus and his ministry probably started roughly six months before Jesus' ministry did.

In that respect, John had a special role: to go before the Lord and prepare the way for him. Isaiah and Malachi both said that God would send a messenger ahead of Jesus. Sometimes, we call him “the Forerunner.” In ancient times, kings would travel around their kingdoms dispensing justice and settling disputes. They often came with a large body of officials and guards and they needed to be housed and fed. They needed space to work and the people needed to know that the king was coming so they could bring their petitions to him. So messengers would go out before the king to prepare his way. They might insist on road repairs, especially if the king were riding in a coach or a litter. They would arrange for receptions in every town, so the people could welcome the king and get the benefit of his coming.

That's what John was sent to do. But it wasn't an administrative function focused on housing and food for Jesus. It wasn't a ceremonial function focused on the public welcome. It was a spiritual function, focused on bringing the light of Christ to a darkened world. John came to proclaim the forgiveness of sins. In that regard, John was also the first New Testament preacher. He came to announce the dayspring, the dawn of a new day of grace and forgiveness. That's how the light was spread. And it's the same for us. God has given us one way to bring light to the world: to speak the good news. Now today, we have lots of new ways to do that. Every week, I tweet my sermon theme and my secretary posts my sermons online. Many congregations digitally record their pastor's sermons and broadcast them – sometimes they're even live. I don't think John could've even imagined things like that. But even though John never used the internet or social media, he shined the light of Christ by announcing, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

That is our message, too. Zechariah said something very interesting about the dawn. He said, “**The rising sun will come to us from heaven,**” or as the hymn says, Jesus is “the Dayspring from on high.” Doesn't that actually reverse what we see if we go outside and watch the sun rise? At midnight, it's still dark, but then slowly, the sky in the east begins to brighten. But it starts low in the sky, really on the horizon. As the dawn gets closer, more and more the eastern sky lights up and it gets brighter and brighter until the sun comes up. But it comes up, not down. Jesus comes down from heaven. He is the Son of God who took on human flesh to live here and die here and then rise so that all our sins are forgiven. But he is also the message God sends. The Holy Spirit reaches down from heaven and works through that gospel and he brings light to hearts that were in darkness. He did that for you and me on the day we were baptized. He does that over and over again as we proclaim the good news. He will continue to do that until Jesus comes again from heaven and finally and completely blows all darkness and sin away and leaves us with nothing but his love. That's what we're looking forward to. While we wait, we pray: **come as the Dayspring from on high. Bring light from heaven through your word.**

I don't like getting up in the morning. But it is something to watch the dawn break and the night retreat. That's what's happening right now. Ever since Jesus first came, the eastern sky has been blazing with light. The night is almost over. The day is almost here. Soon, Jesus will come again. But already now, we have the light. Rejoice in it. Share it. Amen.