

“Bless It”

Luke 1.68–79

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 11 November 2007

You may think it is totally weird for me to have picked a Christmas text for Consecration Sunday...and you may be right! So, how does this song – or canticle – fit in with the idea of stewardship and with dedicating our financial commitments to the church for the coming year? Maybe you don't see the immediate connections.

I also have long memory of the Canticle of Zechariah, sometimes called “the Benedictus,” which is the Latin word for the first word of the canticle: *Blessed*. I remember as a little kid in the children's choir at Second Congregational UCC in Greenwich, Connecticut, singing this canticle: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he hath visited and redeemed his people.” That text and music is lodged somewhere in my mind and as stayed there since I was 10 or 11 years old (in the late Cretaceous Era). And that's a blessing in some ways, because the very fact that an affirmative message – a celebration of Christ's presence on earth – has been in my head for 37 years means that I absorbed something *good* from church, and most of the theology I know from childhood comes from music, and in that congregation, it was very good music.

Back to Zechariah – an old man, the father of John the Baptizer: You may remember that he loses his ability to speak during the time of his wife, Elizabeth's, pregnancy, and then after the birth of John, he regains speech to affirm Elizabeth's choice: “His name is John,” Zechariah says. And then the old man sings out this prophecy, not about John, but about Jesus, who will soon be born. And Zechariah is ecstatic that he will, in fact, witness the birth of the messiah in his own lifetime. And so, he sings this beautiful poem of blessing and praise: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably upon his people and redeemed them.”

Now, please do yourself a favor and don't try to take this beautiful canticle literally and dissect it. We don't really know if someone was there transcribing Zechariah's words (probably not) or if he said anything at all. Just let the words soak into you, like warm water in a bathtub, that soaks out some aches and pains. As is true with any of the Christmas narratives, just listen for the beauty of the story and its larger truths.

Zechariah recounts the words of the prophets who promised that a messiah would come from the house of God's servant, David. He recalls the covenant of God with Abraham – that we ourselves can serve God without fear. And that Jesus would be called the highest of all the prophets. And that those of us who sit in the shadows of death will see a new brilliant light come into the world. *Blessed be the Lord God of Israel!*

You still don't see the connection to Consecration Sunday, do you?!

What is Zechariah's mood when he sings this song of blessing? Is he somber or solemn? Is his heart filled with rage? Is he wracked with fear? *No. None of these.* Zechariah is practically bursting with the sense of generosity – the generosity of God in allowing him to have a son and also giving the world a messiah – and bursting with the sense of abundance – the abundance of God in sending a line of prophets extending from Abraham to Jesus. And there has been a lot said about generosity and abundance in our services lately. (Copies of our sermons are available in the new cabinets by the new outside doors near the Narthex.) *Are you sensing the connection?*

And so the way Zechariah responds is through song. For some of us, it's the very deepest, most visceral way to be in touch with God: to pray through song.

What was true for Zechariah is what has been handed down across the millennia in this canticle. And it is as true for us today as it was in Judea in the first century. God is

the source of all that is, and the character of our God is generosity and abundance. And for us, who follow Jesus, we must grasp onto these truths: of God's generosity and God's abundance, and **make them our own**. There are many ways we are not able to emulate God, but these two traits are ones that we can adopt in our lives right now.



You and I have – countless times – been “rescued from the hands of our enemies.” Think about a time in your life when you thought you were going to be swallowed up by something. For some of us, it might have been cancer, or a difficult exam, or a bout of depression, or struggling with alcohol, or the end of a relationship, the death of someone you love, or the loss of a job.

Close your eyes for moment, know that you are in a safe place, in the hands of God who loves you with incredible depth. And just allow yourself to go to that place where you were “in the hands of your enemies.” Think just for a moment of the pain you were in during that struggle in your own life. And just be with it. *[pause]* And now, envision God or Christ with you, with a loving hand upon you, saying, “All will be well. And all will be well. And all manner of things will be well.” *[pause]* And imagine God or Christ guiding you through the dark shadows of the pain and the suffering you have endured into the light of new beginnings. You have been delivered from the hands of your enemies. And you are not alone. You are here, right now, in the presence of God and your church family. Safe. Whole. Loved. And at peace. [When you are ready, open your eyes and look at the glory around you.]

And I see you sitting here, and I know that every person in this room has been through a struggle. And I see the glory of God coming through your eyes, and I know that you have been delivered. And I know that this will happen again and again and again to each of us.



Sometimes it is hard to know how to respond after coming through what St. John of the Cross called “the dark night of the soul.” And Zechariah tells us. (He doesn't just tell us, he sings it to us.) “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he hath visited and redeemed his people.”

We respond to God's blessing by *returning the blessing to God and to God's people*. Having come through the shadows and the night, we are now equipped to “serve God without fear.” We are ready to serve with faith, not fear.

Blessing and serving God and God's people. That's why we are here today. We do that in many aspects of our lives. But, today we come with a sense of intention of making a commitment to serve God without fear. We come today to be partners with God in making a difference in the world. We come today to say “thanks.” We come today to covenant with one another with God to work together.

As God has blessed you and delivered you from your enemies, **how can you live into a sense of blessing God and serving without fear?** May we, each of us, live our lives thus. “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on us and redeemed us.” Amen.