

As I read and reread Zechariah's prayer I noted that his prayer has within it the four emphases of the Advent candles: light, peace, joy and love. As God's promise through Malachi is fulfilled in John, Zechariah uses the images of Advent to prophesy John's ministry and the ministry of the coming Messiah. John has come to prepare the world for the coming of the promised Messiah – he will bring light, peace, joy and love.

Although the text says that Zechariah, filled with the spirit, spoke this prophecy about John, I see it more as a father's prayer for his beloved son, a blessing of the life he is cradling in his arms.

Zechariah was member of the priestly order of Abijah. His lineage dictated his profession. His wife, Elizabeth, was also a descendant of Aaron and the priestly line. Although women were not normally recognized in this area Luke deems it needful to his story. Even though they both had been faithful to God and their calling they were without children. They had grown old faithfully serving God.

As was the custom the lot falls upon Zechariah to burn incense in the Sanctuary of God. While there fulfilling his duties an angel appears to Zechariah with good news, he is to become a parent. He is not sure what to make of this. He and Elizabeth are old. She is well beyond the years of child bearing. How can this be? Because he questions he is given a sign, he is made mute. As he lingers in the Sanctuary the people outside wonder what is happening. When he does emerge he cannot speak. Something has happened. God is again moving in history.

Elizabeth conceives and a child is born. As traditions dictates the family gathers on the eighth day to name the boy. They want to name him Zechariah or after another in the family. Elizabeth insists his name is to be John. She cannot be believed so they bring a tablet to Zechariah and ask him the child's name. He writes: "His name is John." Immediately his tongue is loosened and he begins to praise God and celebrate the action of his God and proclaim the ministry of this child.

The question of those gathered is: "What then will this child become?" (1:66). Zechariah in his prayer gives a glimpse into how God's hand will be on John. He will be prophet of the most high (1:76). He will stand in the long line of those who speak for God. He will be one who will prepare the way for the coming of God's Messiah as Malachi foretold. He will announce to the world the coming of One who has been promised.

He will be a "light" breaking forth in the darkness (1:79). John is called to be a spark. One to get the world interested again in the words of the prophets. He will remind them of the ancient prophecies and what they say about the Messiah. He will draw people back to God. He will call Israel back to God's original intent, to be a light to those who dwell in darkness, to be a light to the nations showing them the true image of God. He will begin to light the way for the coming of the God's Anointed.

His coming will be one of "peace." The One who is coming is coming in peace. This was not the image the people had of the Messiah. They were expecting a warrior Messiah. We watched a Hallmark movie last night. It was about two six year-old twins and their skill at getting rid of nannies. In one scene they were trying on their

angel costumes for the school play and they did not want to be in an angel dress. However the nanny said they were “warrior angels”. She had not made their swords yet. Now they were ready to be angels, if they could be warrior angels. As the other angels sang, “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing” they fought with their swords, after all they were warrior angels. This was the image of the coming Messiah. One who would rid the land of those who did not belong. John is coming as one who announces the Messiah will come in peace, a light to those who dwell in darkness (Jewish reference to Gentiles). Peace is coming to all peoples.

This is a day of celebration and “joy”. The day is coming when they will “serve without fear” (1:73). The family has gathered. John is named. New life is being held in the arms of an aged mom and dad. God is again moving in the world. God is here. God is coming. This day is a day of joy and celebration. There is excitement in the land. Prayers have been answered. A son has been born to Zechariah and Elizabeth: “The Lord has shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her” (1:58b).

The whole prophecy is filled with the theme of “love”. God has again looked favorably on the people (1:68). History is again being repeated. God is again redeeming the world. Salvation has come in the form of love. We are reminded again that our redemption is the product of love. This is a lesson that we often fail to remember. We must continue to love people into God’s kingdom. Our God has redeemed and is redeeming us through love. Our God is a God of love demonstrated in Advent and Christmas.

We have in Zechariah’s prayer the Advent images of light, peace, joy and love. We have his prophecy for a son who will prepare the way for the One who is coming, the One who will forever change the world. John is beginning a new adventure with God—an adventure of light, peace, joy and love.

As we gather again at this Table and remember the Risen Christ we remember the One who came as light, peace, joy and love. In Zechariah’s words (1:76-79):

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989
NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1989