

2nd Sunday after Christmas – Year C
January 3, 2010
Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY
Luke 1:68-75
Pastor Paul Horn

Feeling Pessimistic about the New Year? Look to the Lord!

I. He freed his people from sin

II. He freed his people to serve

⁶⁷ *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.*

Isn't it amusing how a simple flip of a calendar page seems to hold some kind of magical promise of newness? January 1st is a sign of better things to come, renewed reason for hope and optimism, things will be different than last year! Don't get me wrong, I'm all for "better things to come," but by simply posting a new calendar with new numbers on it makes me a little more pessimistic than optimistic. If we are realistic, the world we live in will be just as sinful and just as godless as it was on December 31st, 2009, if not increasing in wickedness. The headlines in the New Year will be different from those of last year, names and places will change, but the reports of terrorist attacks, random shootings and suicides, of greed and human depravity will be the same. We woke up on New Year's Day in a world that is decaying and dying and feeling the effects of sin, as it had been.

Not only has the dawn of a new year not changed the world, it hasn't changed us. On January 1st, did you not look into a mirror and see the same sinful human being that you saw the day before? Will not the same struggles with your sinful nature and the same spiritual weaknesses continue to render you powerless this year as they did last year? Can you will away those sinful desires with a simple New Year's Resolution? I don't think so. I know that this year I will be the same husband who is far from perfect, the same father who will fail his children, the same friend who will not always be there, the same pastor who will not do his best. I will struggle with the same temptations as I did last year. I will have the same worries. I will continue to place my self-centered priorities above God's.... this New Year.

I don't want it to be that way. I want to be a better husband, a better father, friend and pastor. The reason is my Savior Jesus died for me, made me his child and heir through holy baptism. By faith I have in me a desire to change my sinful behaviors. But I know who I am. I have good intentions by making resolutions to change those sinful behaviors, but I see how terribly I've attempted to carry them out. More importantly, I see how miserably I fail to be what God demands of me.

Imprisoned by past resolutions that were never accomplished, enslaved by past sins, locked up by the devil's temptations and the desires of my sinful flesh that I seem never to say no to, I feel that I can't break free from this prison, which would cause me, or any of us to despair in our struggle against the sinful nature, to lose hope in our fight against Satan's temptations, to give up, abandon God and say "What's the use?" Like the man who finds out he's terminally ill, or a woman whose cancer never seems to go into remission, we scream for some kind of freedom, "Release me from this pain and struggle that I cannot win!" Like Apostle Paul we cry out, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?!"

I can't help but wonder if Zachariah felt that way? After all, he verbally doubted a direct promise from God. Do you remember the story of Zachariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist? Zachariah was a priest. One of his priestly duties was to light incense in the temple and offer prayers to the LORD on behalf of the people of Israel.. One day while he was in the temple lighting incense an angel appeared to him and said, "Your wife will have a son. You will call him John. He will be the forerunner for the Lord's Messiah." Zachariah didn't believe it because, well, he and his wife were well beyond the years of childbearing. Because of his unbelief the angel struck Zachariah mute. But now, 9months later, 8 days after his son's birth, on the day of circumcision and the day of naming the child, he writes on a tablet, "His name shall be John," and his tongue was loosened! Notice that he does not curse God for his handicap the past nine months, but he bellows a song of thanksgiving and praise and prophesy. vs67 tells us that Zachariah was filled with the Holy Spirit as he sang. He received a special outpouring of the Spirit's power to utter God's Word!

Vs68 **Blessed be Lord God of Israel!** And why shouldn't God be praised? **He has come!** (**literally, he has visited us!**) Zachariah had a picture of the Old Testament in mind, when God came to visit his people through a pillar of cloud and pillar of fire in the wilderness, the times he visited Abraham and other believers in human form. Yes, God had come down to earth to speak to his people, but this visitation that Zachariah prophesies about is extra special. Zachariah knew the purpose that his son John would have in life. He would prepare hearts of the people for the one who was promised to come as God made flesh, the Messiah, the Savior of the world. Blessed be God because he has visited us! The Christ has come!

This was a bit unusual, for Zachariah to sing in this way. Jesus had not yet been born. Mary had come to visit Elizabeth and him for the past few months, so he knew that the Messiah had been conceived in her womb. But he had not suffered and died for sins. Zachariah sings speaks as if Jesus had already done all that. In Zachariah's mind God had already accomplished his plan of salvation. That's how sure and certain his promises are!

Zachariah cites two specific promises from the LORD regarding the Messiah that he would keep.

In **Vs69** he mentions the prophecy about **the House of David**. This prophecy from 2Samuel 7 which you heard this morning in the First Lesson, is from the prophet Nathan who told King David that an offspring from David's family tree will be the Messiah. That prophecy was 1000 years old! The second prophecy Zachariah sings about is in **Vs72 He has come... to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham**. The oath he refers to is Genesis 17:7. God promised Abraham that someone from his descendants would come and save the world from sin. Abraham lived 2000 years before Christ.. I don't know about you, but I can't keep a promise I made last week! Oh, how God is unlike us! He promised he would come to save us from our sins and he has!

Listen to how our God has come... **Vs69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us**. In the language of the Old Testament Hebrew *horn* was a picture of strength and power. My last name may be Horn, but my slender body is not exactly a picture of strength and power.. But the horn of a ram, a rhinoceros or a Texas longhorn says, "Don't mess with me!" **The horn of salvation** is a description of the Savior's work. Jesus will carry his work out with omnipotence. He will be omnipotent, which means *all powerful*. And he will use his power **for us**, that is, for our benefit.

Here's how he used his power for us... **Vs68 he has redeemed his people, (literally: he has accomplished redemption for his people)**. Again, Zachariah sings as if redemption is complete. You probably remember from catechism class that *redeem* in Hebrew means *to buy back*. In the Greek here it has a similar meaning, *to release from captivity*. In vs71 Zachariah talks about being saved from **our enemies, from the hand of all who hate us**. It's true that God's people Israel were in captivity during the time of Zachariah. The Romans ruled Palestine. But political freedom is not what Zachariah had in mind. God's people were in spiritual bondage, held captive by the slavery to sin, enslaved by Satan. And so God is right to be praise because he has visited his people in order to free them, to give them peace of conscience and rest for souls.

Wouldn't it be nice if God would do that for us, free us from our enemies, the Taliban and Al Qaida? But how much more important that he has saved us from our spiritual enemies; Satan, who wants to destroy your soul and snatch away your faith in God; your sinful flesh who doesn't allow you to live the way God wants you to; death which would swallow you up forever; hell which is the eternal destination for those who do not believe in God's Son Jesus as Savior and who disobey him. When we reflect back on life we have to admit that hell is something we deserve for our sinful actions, death will come to us all, and that we lose more often than win in the fight against our sinful nature. It would be very easy for us to lose hope and say "What's the use? I can't win!"

Zachariah brings us good news on this 2nd Sunday after Christmas, "Jesus has won!" He has freed you and me from our spiritual enemies! He shows us how powerful a Savior he is, powerful like a ram's horn; he freed us from our enemies by defeating our enemies! During Jesus' earthly ministry, Satan came flying at him with temptation after temptation. But Jesus butted him away, remained sinless. He was and is everything God wants us to be, perfect in everyway. That's how he rendered Satan powerless. Jesus demonstrated his power over sin by dying on behalf of all humankind. Whose death could provide redemption, freedom from sin, for

all humankind? Only Jesus, the Son of God. Finally, Jesus confirmed the prophecy that he was *the horn of salvation* by freeing us from our graves by his resurrection on Easter Sunday.. Death could not hold him. Death will not hold those who hold fast to Christ Jesus.

He has redeemed you, he has freed you from your sins by defeating your enemies. God made a promise to you that this redemption won by Jesus is yours by washing you through water and the Word in Holy Baptism. God continues to make this guarantee that freedom is yours by offering you his body and blood to eat and to drink in this Holy Supper. Salvation is yours. Redemption is yours. Freedom is yours! And God has freed you from your enemies for a very good purpose....

vs74 To rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear all the days of our lives... (literally, Having been delivered from the hand of our enemies, we might serve him without fear...) Having been delivered... Again, Zachariah sings as if this is an accomplished fact, as if it already happened. Why shouldn't he sing that way? All of God's promises are sure and certain. We in 2010 have the benefit of looking back and see, Yes! God has accomplished our salvation! With that in mind, we will look to 2010 with confidence and optimism, even should terrorist attacks land on American soil, even if we face sickness or death, even if friends stab us in the back, even if we fail our friends and family members and coworkers, we know that God has redeemed us. We know that our purpose for 2010, no matter what resolutions we might make, our purpose this New Year is to serve God, without fear, without fear of his wrath or punishment, without fear of our enemies, both physical and spiritual, for God has conquered them all, and has set us free to serve him and him alone. No matter who we are; a single person, a husband, wife, mother, father, child, teenager, an employer or employee, we will carry out our responsibilities as God wants us to. When Satan tries to steer us off track, we will call on the horn of our salvation, who won redemption for us, that he might deliver us from evil, that he might reassure us that he forgives us when we fall, and to give us the strength to live another day to serve him. Feeling pessimistic about the New Year? Look to the Lord! He freed his people from sin. He freed his people to serve. Amen.

Note: the introduction was borrowed from President Schroeder's New Year's message found in January 2010 edition of the *Forward in Christ*.