

"Yah's Way: Forgive and Remember"

Luke 1:57-80

December 18, 2002

Midweek - Advent 3 B

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Boise, Idaho

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As long as you remember what Zacharias' name means, you'll remember what his song means, too. Zacharias: It's a form of Zechariah. "Zachar" means "remembers." "Iah" is short for "Yahweh." Zachari-Yah: Yahweh remembers. That's what Zacharias' name means: Yahweh remembers.

And that's exactly what he sings about, too.

I. A Silent Priest No More

Remember, these are the first words of Zacharias after months of silence. He is the priest who saw Gabriel in the temple, who heard the angel tell him that he and Elizabeth would have a son—a son to be named John, who would prepare the way of the Lord. Zacharias didn't believe it, so Gabriel sentenced the doubting priest to silence until John was born and named.

So began months of frustrating, regrettable silence for Zacharias, but a priest acquainted with the Old Testament could use the time well. He could review the angel's words in his mind, reflecting how Malachi had promised such a messenger. He could ponder how Malachi was just one prophet among many through whom God had promised a Savior; and by faith engendered by that Word, Zacharias could come to believe what Gabriel said. So the day comes when his son is born, and Zacharias sees the promise fulfilled: Yahweh has remembered. Eight days later, then, when it's time to circumcise and name the boy, Zacharias carries out the Word and names him John. It is then that, to the wonder and fear of the neighborhood, Zacharias can finally speak. He can speak because God promised that he would, and Yahweh remembers His promises.

A boy named John and a voice again: Yahweh has remembered. But there are greater promises being fulfilled, and so Zacharias declares:

68 "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel,
For He has visited and redeemed His people,
69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us
In the house of His servant David,
70 As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets,
Who have been since the world began,
71 That we should be saved from our enemies
And from the hand of all who hate us,
72 To perform the mercy promised to our fathers
And to remember His holy covenant,
73 The oath which He swore to our father Abraham:
74 To grant us that we,

Being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
Might serve Him without fear,
75In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.

76"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest;
For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,
77To give knowledge of salvation to His people
By the remission of their sins,
78Through the tender mercy of our God,
With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us;
79To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace."

This is an important psalm of praise, first uttered by Zachari-Yah: "Yahweh remembers" sings that Yahweh remembers.

What does Yahweh remember? He remembers His oath. He remembers His covenant. He remembers His promise of salvation for His people.

He has promised it from the very beginning-so says Zacharias. Before He even described the consequences of the Fall to Adam and Eve, He first told them that a Savior would come from the seed of the woman to crush the head of Satan (Gen. 3:15). From then on, He would not leave the world without a prophet to declare His promise. It was Yahweh's Word, and Yahweh remembers.

He renewed His promise with Abraham. When animals were sacrificed and blood was shed at His command, Yahweh came to be present with Abraham, passing through the midst of the sacrifice itself (Gen. 15:17). He promised Abraham a land; then He promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations, of descendants as numerous as the sand of the shore and the stars of the sky; for one of his descendants would be the Savior of the world. It was Yahweh's promise, and Yahweh remembers.

Throughout the centuries, Yahweh remembered and repeated His promise. Prophet after prophet declared it again and again: Nathan declared that a son of David would rule from David's throne forever (2 Sam. 7:13). Isaiah prophesied that He would be born of a virgin and called Immanuel (Is. 7:14), while Malachi added He would be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:7). The Old Testament Zechariah declared that He would ride into Jerusalem on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zech. 9:9-10), while David vividly described His crucifixion (Ps. 22). Each time one of these prophets spoke the Word of the Lord, Yahweh provided more information about the coming Savior. And in each of these prophecies, there was an additional message: Do not despair. The Savior is coming-Yahweh remembers.

Yahweh remembers-that's what Zacharias sings. He remembers His promise, and John's birth is further confirmation. He will prepare the way of the Highest, and the Highest will save His people from their enemies. He will set them free to serve Him without fear and sin-all the days of their lives.

How will this deliverance take place? Zacharias tells us as he speaks of his son's message. John will "give knowledge of salvation to His-the Lord's-people, by the remission of their sins." John will tell

them of their sin, and John will tell them that Yahweh is at work to take their sins away-to deliver them to holiness and righteousness forever. How is He at work? By visiting them. The Lord-the Son of God, the Dayspring from on high-comes to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.

How? By His sacrifice. The Highest will be made the lowest. Born to Mary and laid in a manger is pretty low. But He will be made lower when He is nailed to the cross-He will be reduced to the object of God's judgment for all sin there, so that His people might be delivered.

This will all take place, says Zacharias. Why? Because Yahweh has promised.

And Yahweh remembers.

II. Yahweh Remembers You

The promise has not ceased: Yahweh remembers you.

Zacharias' song is not some provincial piece that applied only to his household; we don't just hear it for the sake of some quaint history. In fact, his song, called the Benedictus, is part of our liturgy today; you'll find it in the order of Matins. You are in this song.

For one thing, dear Christians, you are children of Abraham-not by genetics and bloodlines perhaps, but by faith; St. Paul declares that those-and only those-who are of faith in Christ are sons of Abraham (Gal. 3:7). If you trust in Christ your Savior, then welcome to the family of Abraham. As God remembered His promises to Abraham, so He remembers you.

For another thing, you have enemies. Oh, not so much the evil boss or the hostile neighbor who doesn't like your cat; not even those who would seek to destroy your home or nation. These are enemies, sure; but the enmity is the work of a darker, far more threatening trio: sin, death and the devil. It is sin that seeks to keep you in darkness, tempting you to follow any desire that will take you away from the light of Christ. It's death that's always always shadowing you, catching the corner of your mind, hoping to haunt you with his inevitability. The devil is defeated already; but as the sour loser that he is, he seeks to take as many with him as he can to the depths of hell for eternity. Oh, yes: You have enemies-and you're no match for them. Sin and death will kill you every time.

But Yahweh remembers you.

And this is the greatest joy of the song: Yahweh does remember you. The oath and covenant He made to Abraham still applies to you, His children. The Savior whom He promised would come and redeem Abraham has also come and redeemed you-indeed, He has died for the sins of all nations. Jesus therefore has died to set you free from your enemies, that you might serve Him in holiness and righteousness forever.

How can you be sure that this song speaks of you? Because Yahweh remembers you; He renews His oath and promise with you-personally, individually.

Hear His oath which He promised to you: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." I baptize you, not "them out there somewhere." Yahweh has made His

promise to you: There, at the font, He works forgiveness of sins and washes yours away, delivers you from death and the devil, and promises salvation to you who believe-as His Word and promises declare. He has given His Son to die so that you might be forgiven; He delights to cleanse you by the waters of Holy Baptism.

And Yahweh remembers! He remembers His oath, and He reminds you each Sunday. Through the lips of the pastor, He declares to you, "I forgive you all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." There you go again: "I forgive you." In other words, He declares, "I made you Mine in Holy Baptism, and I gave you My Word that you are forgiven. By this Holy Absolution, I declare to you that I remember My promise: I have given My Son for you, and I have made you Mine. I remember you."

As He was present to make His covenant with Abraham, so He is present to proclaim it to you. Hear His oath and covenant again: "Take and eat - this is My body - Take and drink; this cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins." Did you hear it? The new covenant is given and shed for you. Yahweh remembers. He remembers His covenant, and He remembers you.

And here's the thing: Remember those enemies you have, that you're no match for? He is. He's already defeated them at the cross. Apart from Christ, you dwelled in the darkness of sin. But Christ has called you out of darkness and into His marvelous light. You can't defeat sin, but He defeats your sin with three little words: "I forgive you." That does it. Sin can't kill you, because Jesus takes your sin away.

Apart from Christ, you lived in the shadow of death. It shadowed your every move, whispering, "Go ahead. Do whatever. Run as long as you like, but I'll catch you in the end." True enough-apart from Christ. But Christ the Lord has defeated death: His resurrection proves to you that the grave has no hold over Him. And this Lord remembers you: He proclaims that He comes to give you life. Death is reduced from an enemy that won't be denied to a shadow, and it can hurt you no more than a bit of shade: It may leave you cold and fearful for a moment, but the Lord promises to raise you up, with a body incorruptible, unto life everlasting. You have life, because the Lord remembers you.

Therefore, so much for the devil. You're no match for his lies, it's true. But the Lord has stripped him of his weapons of sin and death, and all the devil has left are empty lies. In place of those empty lies, the Lord declares this fullness of truth: "I forgive you, and I remember you."

Tonight signals the close of our midweek preparations for Christmas; next Wednesday, we rejoice that Christ is born. As you ponder the Baby in Mary's arms, do not forget the profound truth that Zacharias declares. This is the Son of God become human flesh. He is the fulfillment of God's oath and covenant. He is the Savior of the world; He's the Savior of you. He is the Word made flesh, by whom Yahweh says to you, "I remember you. And so I forgive you all of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen