

The Road of Peace

By Dr. Dave Neale

Before Jesus was born, there was an elderly couple. The woman, Elizabeth was a relative of Mary, and even though she was long past the time of child bearing, she conceived and gave birth to a son. I'm so thankful that Luke tells this story, because he is the only one to do so – the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke is very special indeed.

The angel Gabriel appears to the father Zechariah at the circumcision ceremony of his new son, named John, later to be known as John the Baptist. The great archangel recites the last sentence of the Old Testament to Zechariah:

With the spirit and power of Elijah he [John] will go before him [Jesus], to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.(Lk 1:17; Mal 4:5)

I just find it really interesting that it is our love for our children that is in view in our preparation for the coming of the Anointed One. This is such an intimate and familial thing to say – it strikes close to hearth and home doesn't it?

It wasn't evident at the time, but later as a grown man Jesus said that John **was** Elijah come again to announce the age of the Messiah.¹

After John is born Zechariah, Luke tells us, is filled with the Holy Spirit, a sign of the new age, and **spoke this prophecy**, that which we heard read this morning.

Now, while there are hundreds of references to the OT prophets in the NT, the age of prophecy has been dead for 500 years.² It ended with Malachi. And Zechariah's words in our passage today, Luke 1:68-79, are the only prophecy in the gospel tradition. The voice of the prophet has awoken, for the first time in 500 years, for the day of redemption had finally come (v 68b).

Even more significantly, Zechariah is a prophesying **priest**! Never had the Jews seen such a moment as this – the priest and prophet come together in once voice – to prepare the way of peace.

The things Zechariah prophesies are very familiar to us, especially if you have been walking along this Journey of the Heart we have been on the past year. We have been encountering these ideas repeatedly.

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- This child is the fulfilment of the ***oath that God swore to our ancestor Abraham*** to grant us a blessing and rescue in holiness and righteousness (v 72-73). In Genesis 22 God promised Abraham that ***by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves*** (v 18).

¹ See Mat 17:10-13; Mk 9:11-12. See 2 Kings 2:9-11 for the ascension of Elijah, i.e. that Elijah "ascended in a whirlwind into heaven" in a chariot of fire. Hence, the notion arose that Elijah would return before the birth of the Messiah. Malachi 4:5. Although, when asked in John 1:21, John the Baptist himself said that he was not Elijah.

² Malachi is the last OT prophet. He lives around 500 BCE. Zechariah prophesies, for the first time in 500 years, about the significance of the coming of John and Jesus. Many would say that John the Baptist is then the last prophet before Jesus (Mat 11:7-10).

³ First part of the prophecy dwells on the promise of the Messiah himself, vss 68-73; the second part of the prophecy dwells on the advent of John as the one who prepares the way for the Messiah, vss 76-80. The "child" of vs 76 is John.

- He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the *house of David* his servant (v 69). God promised David that ***I will establish the throne of your kingdom forever.***

The entire drama of what God has done in history through his people Israel, is about to be fulfilled in the dual miracle of the birth of John to barren parents, and the baby Jesus to the virgin girl from Nazareth.

Now... a new dawn has arisen... Luke 1:79, echoing Mal 4:2, ***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.***⁴

The dawn usually comes from the horizon. But this dawn comes from on high! Dawn in the sky. It's light spreads across our darkness and the forlorn prospect of death we face.

John will, our passage goes on to tell us, guide our feet into the road of peace (v 79b). And so we come today to the second candle of Advent, the candle of peace.

I love this metaphor. It is so earthy. The promised peace of this moment, is something we experience by walking on a path, a "road" with our feet (as I choose to translate the Greek word ὁδός, *hodos*, also "path" or "way").

What does this peace mean?

I don't think these passages are talking about a feeling - peace in the sense of tranquility or serenity; these are a state of being I long for but rarely experience.

Maybe in some rare moment when no problems crowd our minds we may feel peace. But I don't think that is what the Bible is talking about here.

It's obviously not peace in a sense of the nations. The world of Zechariah was a world of political turmoil, and war was looming as we know. Certainly today, we remain very far from political peace on earth.

I think this path of ***peace*** is a path of ***knowing***.

- This peace is ***knowing*** that the time has come for light from on High, a dawn in the sky.
- This peace is ***knowing*** that what God promised to Abraham, a blessing for all nations, has now come to fruition.
- This peace is ***knowing*** that through the House of David God has raised up a mighty Saviour.
- This peace is knowing that darkness and even death are conquered by the light of this new dawn.

This ***knowledge*** guides our feet along this Road of Peace.

If the Road of Peace is knowing that God is with us – then our hearts are full. ***And the peace of God, which surpasses even all knowing, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*** (Phil 4:7, my translation).

⁴ We recognize here echoes of the prophet Isaiah: ***But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish for from Galilee of the nations the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who live in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.*** (Isa 9:2)

As we reflect on this Candle of Peace this morning, and as we come to the Table of the Lord, the Road of Peace is right before our feet.

Thanks be to God. Amen