

Sunday 16 December 2018, Cashmere Presbyterian Church

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After John the Baptist was born his father Zechariah was filled by the Holy Spirit and spoke words of prophecy and faith that they were remembered by others and recorded two generations later by Luke. The prophecy of Zechariah is part of our Christmas readings, and is one of the most powerful and all-encompassing statements in the Bible. Zechariah was an old man, a priest all his adult life. 9 months earlier he had had an earth-shattering experience of God, when he had been promised a son, and had been struck dumb. For 9 months he had not spoken a word ... if you like, this prophecy had been gestating for 9 months inside his silence. God inspired, Spirit-spoken, and utterly amazed by a new born son when he had long given up hope of a child of his own. At a time when his people had about given up hope of salvation, or identity. It had been a long time since anyone had been filled with the Holy Spirit. God too had been quiet for a long time. Perhaps God too had been in a time of gestation, waiting in silence for Jesus to be born. As John the Baptist goes on to announce Jesus as the coming Messiah, so John's father at John's birth announces the coming of a saviour, an heir of King David, light of the world.

As we too look to the birth of Jesus.

Zechariah's words ground the 'now' in a long story. Zechariah understands the events in his own home, his own experience, to be part of the story of God going back to the beginning. The story includes the prophets of Israel's past, and the great king of Israel, David, but the main driving force of the story is the promise of God.

God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors.

He has remembered his holy covenant,

the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham (Luke 1:72-73)

This is the heart of history, the substance of the matter, for Zechariah, the great beam of hope that illuminated the events of his wife's pregnancy and John's birth. For Zechariah, the presence and the promise of God flowed through everything, from the beginning to the end, and makes sense of his own life.

The substance of the matter is this – that God is invested in humanity. That God cares about us. That God is at work lifting us up, making something of us, changing us, setting us free.

Zechariah's prophecy hinges on the great grand words 'redemption' and 'salvation'; or in our pew bible translation God is saving us and rescuing us.

This all seems a bit grandiose for a birth of a baby. Both John and Jesus were, as far as we know, quite ordinary little baby boys. But their births were invested with great significance.

And that is my prayer for you this Christmas, that in both the ordinary and the special, you will sense great significance ... for you are made for this moment. You are made with great love and care by God, to be part of his great drama of salvation and redemption. This Christmas, in the traditions and the extra effort and the resting and recovering, may you have ears to hear and eyes to see, as Zachariah did, that our lives are a living out of God's promise.

This is my prayer for you this Christmas, in the words of Zachariah, that

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 into the way of peace.

Amen.