



December 10, 2006
Advent 2

Luke 1:67-79
Prepare the Way of the Lord
2. The Dawn of Hope
M. Craig Barnes

Last week I described for you the intense longing of Zechariah and Elizabeth for a child. Much to their surprise, it was in their old age that God granted their wish. A child was finally born to them, named John, an uncommon name at the time. It means “God gives grace.”

The family and friends who witnessed this naming event were amazed by it and asked, “What then will this child become?” Any kid with a name like “God is gracious” clearly has a destiny. The very next thing that happens is that Zechariah breaks out in a hymn, as if the hymn is a response to the question, “What will become of John?”

The hymn, like many of ours, is broken down into four stanzas. The first stanza is found in Luke 1:68-71. There, Zechariah gives praise to God who raised up a Savior. Verses 72-75 provide the second stanza, in which he claims this Savior is the fulfillment of a promise from long ago. In the third stanza, verses 76-77, Zechariah describes the role of his son John who will prepare the way for the Savior. The final stanza in verses 78-79 looks for the tender mercy that the Savior will bring like the dawn from on high. So, the subject outline of the hymn goes like this: stanza one is about Jesus, stanza two is about Jesus, stanza three is about John, and stanza four is about Jesus. You would think that if an old father, who has spent his life waiting for a child, is going to break out in song, he would sing about his own boy. But no, Zechariah starts singing about Jesus. He doesn’t get to his own kid until the third stanza, and then he goes back to singing about Jesus again.

I have had the pleasure of visiting a lot of new parents after a baby is born. I always enjoy looking at the father, standing there looking so proud. He’s usually the one to tell me all about the delivery, as if this was all his doing. But I have never, ever heard a father say, “Yeah, it’s a nice kid. I think someday he’s going to be a great help to someone else’s boy.” I’ve held my own newborn. I know that when you look down at your own child, you think the sun rises and sets on this kid. If you’re going to sing, it’s going to be about the kid you are holding.

It isn’t long, though, before that joy turns into pressure and expectations. Ever so subtly, you begin to press your kid to act like someone upon whom the sun rises and sets. And as adults, who are formed and shaped by these early expectations, we live our lives trying so hard, as if it were all up to us and the hopes and fears of all the years were met in our effort. So is it any wonder that once again this Christmas we find ourselves living such frantic, crowded lives?

From the very beginning of John’s life, Zechariah makes it clear that the story of his son, whom he loves so much, is only a part of a greater story about Jesus. And that makes all the

difference in John's life. He is just the third stanza of the hymn. He exists not to be the Savior, but to serve the Savior by preparing the way for him. The Christmas story is not about you or me. This is not about our hopes and dreams. It is about the hopes and dreams of Jesus--the dreams which we serve until they do, in fact, become ours as well.

Sixty-five years ago last Thursday Pearl Harbor was bombed, and the story of our nation was forever changed. I grew up listening to the stories of my uncles who knew in that moment, on Sunday, December 7, 1941, that it did not matter what they had planned to do with their lives. They had to enlist to be of service to a nation that was at war. But it wasn't just about the service men. My aunts, parents, and grandparents knew that, even as civilians, they were all a part of this new defining center of the country. Thus, the stories of all their lives were also altered in a moment. They became a part of a bigger story that shaped and molded their identities along with the identity of the nation. It was not a time when anybody lived an autonomous life.

You never want to confuse autonomy with freedom. In the 1940's we were free but not autonomous. By contrast, today many of us are autonomous but not free. Is it really freedom when we are enslaved to the illusion that we are on our own to wrestle a little happiness out of the hands of our harsh world? That has left us lonely, divided, and so desperate in our individual searches for personal fulfillment that we now no longer even think about what is at the heart of the nation.

The churches across the country have not been a great help discerning the heart of the nation in recent years. Liberal and conservative churches have taken turns vying for political influence in an effort to legislate their particular moralities and ideologies. Worse, other churches have tried to attract members by marketing Jesus as one more product to try in this individual pursuit of fulfillment as if Jesus has come to prepare the way for us. So is it any wonder that the thing pastors find themselves talking to parishioners about more than anything else is calling: "What is the real purpose of my life? Isn't there a reason for my being here, a mission, a calling?" people are now asking. "I'm tired of collecting stuff. I'm tired of fretting about my old hurts. Frankly, I'm tired of me. Isn't there a bigger, better story for life?"

Yes, that is what Christmas offers. When Christ comes, he brings the holy gift you have always wanted—a calling that weaves your life into a larger, more dramatic story. The story begins with Jesus. The story depends on Jesus. And the story ends with Jesus. You and I are just the third stanza in the middle of it all. This is not meant to belittle the human endeavor but to give it an eternal significance in God's great story called salvation.

The story of your life, according to Genesis, started with the words, "in the beginning God." That means it doesn't start when you graduate, get married, find a job or retire. Never put off the beginning of your life. Nor did it start when you were hurt, divorced, unemployed, or sick. The story begins long before we arrived as the story God is writing for all humanity.

Your life's story, according to Revelation, ends as wonderfully as it began. It gets a little scary before the ending, but it does end finally with peace on earth. God has already written the ending, and there is nothing we can do to mess it up.

The most decisive, exciting chapter of the story was not when you or I were born, but when Christ was born, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. That's when we knew we were free. We are free from the autonomous struggle to construct identity for ourselves and free to live for something so great it will outlive us.

The Christmas story engrafts you into this world-changing work of Christ. That gives you roots deep enough to withstand any storm of adversity. As a pastor, I watch closely how people respond to their losses. Some fall apart. The only ones who withstand the storm are those with roots that run deeper than their own experiences.

Being grafted into the great biblical drama is also how we avoid wasting our lives with small, autonomous stories that in the end don't make much of a difference. If you want to know what your part is, what your mission is in the great story of God's tender mercy, don't start by looking at yourself. Start at the beginning with the stanzas about Jesus. Until you have come to know him, you will never know yourself.

This means that, if there are changes in your life which you believe God is calling you to make, you will never be successful making those changes until you have come to see Jesus differently. If you are called to be more gracious, and would like to be known by your family and colleagues for your mercy, then you will have to see the tender mercy Jesus has given you. You cannot give what you have not first received. If you are called to be loving, then you will have to see that, in Jesus, God came to find you because he couldn't stand to be separated from you. If you are called to be hopeful because the story of your life has fallen into a dark chapter, then you will have to see that, at Christmas, "by the tender mercy of God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness." Whatever the calling may be in your life, it is first a call to Jesus Christ. Then there is your moment, the glorious third stanza.

Benediction: Christmas without carols is unimaginable. But remember that the songs are all about Jesus, and, in that, you'll find your freedom from and your freedom for. Amen.