

December 7, 2025

Paul Purdue preaching

Luke's gospel opens with a portrait of community, with stories of Jesus' extended family. Zechariah was a lay priest, working a trade or farming most weeks, but serving four weeks in the Jerusalem Temple. There were thousands of priests, so Zechariah might have served his whole life without ever getting the privilege of lighting the incense offering. But the lot fell to Zechariah and he entered the Temple alone and poured the incense over the hot coals. Perhaps Zechariah whispered Psalm 142 *"Let my prayer be counted as incense before you a fragrant offering before the Lord."* How do you name your holiest moments, where earth and heaven intersect?

The smoke drifted up towards the heavens and Zechariah saw an angel standing before the altar. *"Don't be afraid Zachariah. Your prayers have been answered. You and your wife Elizabeth are going to have a child. Name him John (Yohanan: God is gracious/ God gives). People everywhere will rejoice with you. You will delight in the child. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Yohanan will be great in the eyes of the Lord like Elijah. Yohanan will restore people, turning hearts to God's tenderness, changing minds to right thinking, and guiding people along a righteous path."* (Adapted from Luke 1)

Zechariah will leave this holy encounter unable to speak for 9 months, but when Zechariah returned to the congregation, they knew Zechariah had seen a vision of something excellent, lovely and worthy of praise.

For the nine months of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Zechariah remained silent. Imagine that? What would that do to a marriage, a partnership, a life? Even without Zechariah's words, Elizabeth and Zechariah welcomed their young niece, Mary, the mother of our Lord, who needed sanctuary and they agreed on the name *Yohanan: "God is gracious-God's gift."* They seem to be abiding in peace.

All the community gathered around their rabbi, bringing prayers, well-wishes, covered dishes and baby blankets. Zechariah and Elizabeth named the child caps *Yohanan: "God is gracious-God's gift."* After nine months of silent solitude, Zechariah breaks forth in song.

Bless the Lord

Blessed the Lord oh my soul

*God has looked favorably upon us
and redeemed us.*

As God spoke through the prophets,

*God has shown us mercy
and remembered the covenant,
rescuing us from our enemies,
So that might serve God
without fear
with holiness and righteousness
dwelling in God's presence.*

What does your heart sing in life's most beautiful moments? How do we name our deepest love, wonder, and joys? Do we lift our hands in total praise? Do we fall on our knees? When holding a baby, enjoying a meal, or embracing a friend can we be present, still, observant long enough to find our songs? Do we say with Zechariah, "blessed be the Lord our God" or with my mother "Thank you Jesus"?

Rooted in experience, tradition, and reason- mercy, grace and love, Zechariah is grounded and ready to bless the child in his arms.

*And you, child, Yohanan,
you will be called a prophet,
you will go before the Lord to prepare the way,
to give people knowledge of salvation (or wholeness)
by the forgiveness of their sins.
Because of the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high is breaking upon us,
Shining around those who sit in the shadow of death,
Guiding our feet along the path of peace."*

What do we pray for our children? What do we long to give to our daughters, nieces, nephews and neighborhood schools? Do we pray that they might be happy, healthy, successful, get into a good school, get a good job, marry a good soul, live a good life? Zechariah prays that Yohanan will be a good person. Seeking "the good life" is very different from seeking goodness. . Zechariah prays that this tiny 8 day old child will live a life that helps people encounter God. What if everyone who met us might sing, as Alpha, and Glenda sing to one another, "because I knew you, I've been changed for good?"

*Yohanan, prepare people for God,
help them find wholeness
Tell them "they are forgiven"
Share God's tender mercy,*

*Shine like the dawn,
Guide us along the path of peace.*

I grew up amid the intersection of the modern self-help/self-care movement and faith. Maybe you did too? I memorized and often prayed Philippians 4:6-7 *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* That is a solid and helpful prayer, but a better prayer may be *“God guide my feet along the path of peace”*. Lord, Let me be a channel of your peace. Do we ask God for good lives or to shape us as forces for good: for wholeness, forgiveness, mercy, and peace. Guide my feet along the path of peace! Peace is not a present wrapped up under the tree or some spiritual sauce that makes everything alright. Peace arrives as we walk the path of peace: we make peace- we bring peace with us.

Jesus declares *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”* (Matthew 5) There is a vast distance between longing for inner peace and seeking to be a peacemaker. How different is it to pray “Lord, I need peace” and “Lord let me be a peacemaker”? Sometimes I wonder if our exhaustive pursuit of inner peace keeps us from becoming peacemakers. Jesus says forgive and you will be forgiven, give and you will receive, stop judging and you will not be judged, stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Could it also be true: “be a peace-maker and you will find that ever elusive inner peace”? (Luke 6)

Peace is complex and not entirely in our control. Jesus wept over the capital *“Jerusalem, Jerusalem the city that kills the prophets ...If you, even you, had only recognized even today the things that make for peace!”* (Matthew 23 & Luke 19) Romans 12:18 informs us *“If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”* Yet, into a world as rooted in violence as our own, and after a soul-crushing Good Friday defeat, Jesus with the wounds of injustice still visible in his body, comes to us and declares, *“Peace be with you. My peace I give to you, Receive the Holy Spirit. Just as God sent me, so I am sending you: go preach peace, forgiveness, and wholeness.”* (From John 20)

Jesus comes into our world as The Prince of Peace, AND Jesus comes to build a kingdom of love and justice as well. Blessed are the peace-makers, for they bring wholeness, forgiveness, mercy and light as they walk through this world. What if we sought to pass along that kind of peace to our neighbors? Oh, let us not just seek the peace of God but let us prayerfully seek to become peacemakers. What if we find Christ's peace by incarnating peace?

Pray with me

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, let me sow wholeness;
where there is doubt, let me sow faithfulness;
where there is despair, let me sow hope;
where there is evil, let me sow goodness;
where there is sadness, let me bring presence.

O Divine Teacher, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
In forgiving that we are forgiven,
and in peacemaking that we find the path of peace. Amen
(adapted Prayer of Saint Francis)