

Preacher: Ruth Preston Schilk
Date: Dec. 6 Advent II
Scriptures: Luke 1:67-78; 3: 1-6
Sermon: *A Father's Praise*

If I were to ask you for the title of your favourite song, I expect most of you could come up with *some* title. Perhaps the struggle in having to choose just **one** song is because songs are often tied to important events or circumstances. For instance, someone might say that such-and-such a song is their favourite because it was the song playing when they met their future spouse. Someone *else* perhaps chose *their* special song because it gave them hope when they were quite down. Yet another person may choose ‘their’ song because it reminds them of some other important event in their life.

Since our lives often consist of a **number** of significant experiences, this may explain why we have more than one special song and why they each may be quite different in style.

Songs can become like ‘bookmarks’ that help us hold onto and refer back to **personal** memories and reflections. Songs can also become like ‘Facebook accounts’ that help us share an experience **communally**.

At various times in **my** life, even over the course of a week, I’ve had a **variety** of ‘theme’ songs whose lyrics have so easily voiced what I could have only struggled to articulate in my **own** words. Yet I know that what happens to me and what I feel — often **needs** to be proclaimed. Sometimes ‘my song’ is a *hurtin’* song because I am feeling wounded. Sometimes ‘my song’ is a *Halleluiah* song— sung **inside** the house with my ‘outdoor’ voice (just ask my family). Sometimes ‘my song’ **combines** both joy and sorrow, like “a broken Hallelujah” as Leonard Cohen has so aptly penned.

If my next question to you would be “Who are some biblical song-writers,” *that* might be a little trickier one to answer. We might first think of King David, author of many of the psalms, those songs of praise and lament that are at the same time our prayers to **God** and God’s words to **us**.

We might think of young Mary and the song she sang after the angel Gabriel announced to her that she would bear the Son of God (Luke 1:46-55).

We might recall old Simeon, and *his* song in response to recognizing the baby Jesus as the Messiah when Mary and Joseph presented him in the temple (Luke 2:29-32).

Did you remember or know that Zechariah (a secondary, but nonetheless important figure in the Christmas story) was *also* a song-writer? He may be better-remembered for being *unable* to speak at all. When the angel told Zechariah that he and his wife Elizabeth would become parents, Zechariah disbelieved because they were both old. The angel said that his words would be fulfilled, but Zechariah would become mute, unable to speak, until the day the child John would be born (Luke 1:5-24).

During the nine months that Zechariah awaited the birth of his son John,
--whom the angel had said even before his birth would be filled with the Holy Spirit,
--who would turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God,
--who with the spirit and power of Elijah would turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous,
--who would make ready a people prepared for the Lord...

...during these long months, Zechariah surely considered what his first words would be when he could speak again. It would be like when we've been away a long time, and we think to ourselves, "When I get home, the first thing I'm going to do is...." Or, "When I recover from this illness or injury, here's what I've got planned...." Or "When I get this term paper finished...." There's been a long time to think, to reflect, to create a response for when one time comes to an end and the new time arrives.

There is only one opportunity to say something for a first time at a special occasion, so words are chosen carefully and deliberately. We don't want to be like the hap-hazard best man at a wedding who proposed a toast "To the Gride and Broom"!

Zechariah chose **his** first words carefully. Being filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:67), how could he *not*? His song is both broad and personal, a prophecy and a benediction. As God burst into their lives with a child who would grow up to become John the Baptist, a way-maker for Jesus the Saviour of the world – Zechariah broke out in song about relationships. (Isn't that what so many good songs are about?).

Like a ballad or carol in which each section adds to the story, none of what he sings can be left out. Zechariah thanks God for the Messiah, highlights a brief history of salvation, includes a special address to baby John himself, and concludes with a prophecy that a way of peace will come.

Thanksgiving for the Saviour

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel...who has raised up a mighty saviour for us...as he told us from the prophets," Zechariah begins. Our God is a God who so values the relationship with His people, who longs for our healing and wholeness (which **we** can't bring about by ourselves)

that he broke into our world with His Son, Jesus, who, in relationship with us and us with Him, would be our Saviour. If Zechariah had stopped there, that would have been enough. But he continues.

A brief history of salvation

To say that Zechariah then gave “brief history of salvation” sounds about as thick in content as an entire set of volumes called “A Brief History of the World.” Yet, Zechariah, in this *thick* part of his song, is able to recount with simplicity that God has remembered his promises all the way back to Abraham, and delivered his people, so that out of *our* end of the relationship we may

--serve him without fear,

–and in holiness (because we belong to God and God is holy),

--and in righteousness (living as God’s people should) all our days

(Luke 1:71-75).

And you, child

“We might have expected that Zechariah’s song would be **all** about his little boy. He surprised us by beginning with the Messiah whom God was about to send. But he **was** very pleased about John, and in this part of his song he prophesies the child’s future. He addresses him directly, and says that he will be called *the prophet of the Most High*. There had been no prophet among the Jews for centuries [not since Malachi who had prophesied 430 years earlier], so his words should not be taken too calmly. John would represent a radical departure from what had become customary. And not only was he to be a prophet, but he was to prepare the Lord’s way. He would be a forerunner to the Messiah. Specifically he would tell people about the coming of salvation *in the forgiveness of their sins*. John would not save people. No man could. But he would call people to repentance and tell them about **One who could save them**” (Luke 1:76-77) [Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Luke*, rev. ed., (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 89].

A way of peace

Finally, finally having experienced a father's tender love for his child, Zechariah proclaims the **Heavenly Father's** relationship toward us as one of tender mercy "dawning from on high, breaking in, giving light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, **so that our feet may be guided into the way of peace**" (Luke 1:78-79).

God's promises are not easy:

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. (Matthew 5:4)

Take courage; I have conquered the world! (John 16:33)

Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. (Luke 9:24).

God's promises are also not instant:

We are reminded of this from Philippians chapter 1 verse 6: *The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.* We are fully aware of the waiting that happens as we wistfully long for the **completed** promise in the closing bars of Zechariah's song. Ultimately, deliverance, salvation, peace – whatever word you want to use – comes not by military might, but by the forgiveness of sins.

As John grew up and into his role as God's prophet, he "lived the song" that had been sung *to* him and *for* him by his father. "John called on people to turn away from their sins. The acceptance of his baptism was a sign that they had done this. The purpose was *forgiveness*."

Perhaps you read the article called *Forgiveness slowly leads to peace in Southern Sudan* in the November 16, 2009 edition of the Canadian Mennonite. Donita Wiebe-Neufeld begins the article this way:

He left the hospital murderously angry. Revenge on his mind, the young man bought a sharp knife and set out through the village towards his enemy's home. It was Sunday. He stopped at a mud-sided church as the pastor's voice rang out with Jesus' words from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The angry man was shocked that Jesus would forgive his killers. "Now I have to forgive," he thought. Returning to the market, he bought a bag of candy and went to face his enemy. Holding it out, he said, "Be calm. I'm not going to fight you. Let us sit and eat. I forgive you."

Forgiveness leads to peace. All of the world, including Mennonites and other Christians who clamour, work and pray for peace, need to remember or learn for the first time, that **forgiveness** leads to peace.

Jesus, who forgave his own betrayers, captors, and killers, forgives the sins committed by **us** and those committed **against** us. To know that lasting peace that is Jesus' gift to the whole world, we need to be forgiven, **and** as the young man in Sudan realized – we need to repent of our **un**-forgiveness. This is what will "guide our feet into the way of peace."

I think it's brilliant that the article doesn't disclose why the young man was "murderously angry." That way we can all place ourselves in his shoes or at least slip them on part-way. Now imagine being able to say "I forgive you."

I realize that there are many layers to forgiveness, and like some of God's promises, forgiveness is not always easy nor instant. But we can be assured that like God's promises, forgiveness, once begun, will one day be complete

Randy Bachmann, host of CBC Radio's *Vinyl Tap* had a couple of shows devoted to songs that he calls 'ear worms.' An ear worm is a song that once heard, gets in your head and can't be shaken loose. The song or phrase plays itself over and over again in one's mind often leaving the head only via one's voice and thus "infecting" those around with same the ear worm; (again, just as my family).

Scripture has a lot of ear worms, thank God, that won't let go of us when we need reminding of the right way of living and relating, when we need reminding that God will not desert us, that God has great plans for us, and many other promises.

I'm wondering if we could allow parts of scripture from Zechariah's song to become an ear worm not only in our heads but also in our hearts and lives. If we do, we will hear God continually crooning to us that the saving peace we so long to be guided into -- is by the forgiveness of sins (Luke 1:77).

Christ, by his life, death, and resurrection *is* guiding our feet into the way of peace, but the feet belong to *us*. We have a choice to walk in the steps of forgiveness that Christ has shown us. Let us choose this way. Amen.