

December 6, 2020 by Steve Brandon



Christmas Is Light

Luke 1-2

1. Zechariah (Luke 1:5-23; 57-79)

2. Simeon (Luke 2:25-32)

This year, 2020, has been a dark year. It started off with such promise! It was the beginning of a new decade. Things in the world were looking up. It is 2020 after all! This is the year in which our vision for the future should be 20/20 clear.

And then came March and COVID-19. Things in America changed. We saw shutdowns. We were ordered to "shelter-in-place" as this virus spread throughout our nation and throughout our world. Many were prohibited from working. Our economy tanked, as unemployment numbers hit record highs as the workforce was forced to stay at home. As a result of being cooped up at home, many are facing depression and discouragement.

Overall, this virus has brought on death to several hundred thousand Americans. To face these things, we have begun new habits, like wearing masks at work, at school, and at stores. Anywhere public, we are wearing our masks to stop the spread of the virus. We have learned new words, like "social distancing." We have learned new habits, like staying at home and being antisocial.

Many events have been cancelled, like sporting events, theaters, conventions and conferences of all types. Wherever a big crowd gathers, there have been cancellations, including bigger churches. And now, whenever we see crowds of people in a location, a stadium, say, it all looks so strange. It's like those pictures are from another age long past that we vaguely remember. Those photos are of a world gone-by, where we used to live.

Further, 2020 has brought on a fresh awareness of the racial tensions in our country. We have faced some environmental problems, like massive fires on the west coast. We have a politically divided America. I heard a statistic this week that most Americans believe that Biden won the election in November. But more than half of Republicans believe that the election was rigged.^[1] And strangest of all, in 2020, we have kids that actually want to go back to school.

So, in this dark time, I think we need a little Christmas to lighten our days. My sermons during this Christmas season will be around the theme of "Lights of Christmas." We are going to consider the intersection of the theme of light with Christmas. This morning, my message is simply entitled, "Christmas Is Light." That is, it shines in a dark place to give us understanding and joy and hope during these difficult days.

Now, it is totally appropriate, to be considering this theme of light this Christmas season, for Christmas is about light. Or, as I have said, "Christmas is light." Christmas is about light coming into the world. Speaking of Jesus, John says, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness" (John 1:4-5). "The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world" (John 1:9).

As Jesus, the true light, came into the world, he came into to break through the darkness. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone" (Isaiah 9:2). A few verses later, we read of the child that is born to us, the son that is given to us. "His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

This child, who is light, came to those who walked in darkness. This all makes our year, this year of 2020, this year of darkness, an especially appropriate year to consider this theme of light. There is a way in which Christmas brings hope into our lives.

Have you heard the story about Christmas Day, 1914? In 1914, we were several months into World War I. Fighting was heavy on every side. Several weeks before Christmas, Pope Benedict XV "... suggested a temporary hiatus of the war for the celebration of Christmas."^[2] That recommendation was ignored by the commanders. But with the soldiers on the ground, who were weary of fighting, and who needed hope, it was another story.

The story goes that in some places on the Western Front of the war, on Christmas Eve, the Germans placed candles on their trenches and on makeshift Christmas trees on their side. They continued by singing Christmas carols to which the British, on the other side of the front responded by singing Christmas carols of their own. Soon afterwards, the sides were shouting Christmas greetings to each other across the front. Then came some meetings in "No Man's Land," with small gift exchanges, like tobacco, alcohol, buttons and hats.

Christmas Day was more of the same. Captain Robert Miles (of the British) wrote in his journal entry for Christmas Day:

We are having the most extraordinary Christmas Day imaginable. A sort of unarranged and quite unauthorized but perfectly understood and scrupulously observed truce exists between us and our friends in front. The funny thing is it only seems to exist in this part of the battle line – on our right and left we can all hear them firing away as cheerfully as ever. The thing started last night – a bitter cold night, with white frost – soon after dusk when the Germans started shouting 'Merry Christmas, Englishmen' to us. Of course our fellows shouted back and presently large numbers of both sides had left their trenches, unarmed, and met in the debatable, shot-riddled, no man's land between the lines. Here the agreement – all on

their own – came to be made that we should not fire at each other until after midnight tonight. The men were all fraternizing in the middle (we naturally did not allow them too close to our line) and swapped cigarettes and lies in the utmost good fellowship. Not a shot was fired all night. [\[3\]](#)

It's the strange lure of what Christmas can bring. It can bring a bit of hope in a sorry situation. This day has come to be known as "The Christmas Truce." A Scottish soldier recalled this strangeness of it all. He wrote:

I remember the silence, the eerie sound of silence. ... All I'd heard for two months in the trenches was the hissing, cracking and whining of bullets in flight, machine gun fire and distant German voices. But there was a dead silence that morning, right across the land as far as you could see. We shouted 'Merry Christmas', even though nobody felt merry. The silence ended early in the afternoon and the killing started again. It was a short peace in a terrible war. [\[4\]](#)

This is the light of Christmas. It is able to give a bit of hope during dark days. The thought of Christmas is able to give "short peace in a terrible war."

When the generals from each side of the war heard about what took place, they denounced them, warning that future fraternizing with the enemies will be considered treason, and dealt with accordingly (meaning death). Thus, there were no such Christmas truces throughout the rest of the war, not in 1915, not in 1916, not in 1917, not in 1918. [\[5\]](#) But for that moment in 1914, the soldiers of both sides knew and understood and experienced peace.

Now, of course this morning, I'm not advocating a sort-of peaceful feeling for the day of Christmas, which is gone the very next day. Nor am I advocating setting up lights, that only go out the next day. I'm advocating for the true Christmas light, which is Jesus. By way of outline this morning, I want to talk about two men who knew that Christmas was light. The first is ...

1. Zechariah (Luke 1:5-23; 57-79)

Zechariah's story is told in Luke, chapter 1. Zechariah was a priest in the days of Herod, king of Judah.

Luke 1:5

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

These verses set up the drama of the life of Zechariah. He was a priest of the line of Aaron, ordained of the Lord to offer up sacrifices on behalf of the people. But he was old and his wife Elizabeth was barren. They had no children.

Now, when we pick up the story, Zechariah was priest chosen by lot to enter into the holy of holies to offer up the once-a-year sacrifice on Yom Kippur, for the sins of the nation. It was such a holy occasion, that as Zechariah entered through the veil to offer up the sacrifice, "the whole multitude of the people were praying outside" (Luke 1:11).

When Zechariah entered, he saw the angel of the Lord (Luke 1:11). This was not what he was expecting. He was expecting to enter in through the veil to offer up the blood of the sacrifices all alone in this sacred place. The appearance of this angel struck Zechariah with fear. We continue the story in verse 13, ...

Luke 1:13-17

The angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

That's good news (verse 19). Not only did this angel say that he and his wife would have a child in their old age. (This would have been good enough to give Zechariah and his wife great joy.) But the angel also said that his son would be a man of influence. He said he would "be great before the Lord" (verse 15). He said that he would be "filled with the Holy Spirit" (verse 15). He was the one to come in the "spirit and power of Elijah" (verse 17). He was the one who would prepare the people for the coming of the Lord (verse 17).

Now, it brings great joy to my heart to hear of my children doing well. I think of my two oldest, who have both married well and doing well. Carissa is doing well with her teaching and photography business. SR is doing well with his YouTube job. They are thriving in their churches. They are walking with the Lord. Nothing gives me more joy than this (3 John 4).

And as my younger three children mature and find a spouse and settle into life, it will do my heart well to see them walking with the Lord and using their abilities to support themselves, so that they can serve others. But that's yet to come. We don't know exactly who that's going to work out. But we continue to pray for them daily, that the Lord would guide them through these times of transition into adulthood.

So here was Zechariah, hearing the good news that his son will be great, even before he was born! What a great blessing! To know that your son will be great in this world! (Jesus would later affirm this, saying in Luke 7:28, "I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John.") Yet, Zechariah was unbelieving. He doubted the words of the angel.

Luke 1:18-20

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."

As a result of his unbelief, he would be mute until he saw these words come true. So, as Zechariah departed the temple, he was unable to tell those praying outside what happened. He couldn't tell them why he was delayed (verse 21). All he could do is motion to them, but could not tell them anything (verse 22). Yet, his communication was good enough to communicate that he saw a vision (verse 22). Soon afterwards, "his time of service" in the temple was finished. He retired to his hometown in the hill country of Judah (verse 39).

While in his hometown, everything began to happen before his eyes. His wife, Elizabeth, conceived. They were going to have a baby. But six months into the pregnancy, another pregnant woman shows up: Mary, the sister of Elizabeth. Zechariah got to hear her story of how the angel, Gabriel, came and visited her. He told her how she would conceive a son in her virginity.

All this time, as these events unfolded, Zechariah couldn't speak. But he could listen and think. Being a priest, he was educated enough to read and probably had access to the Scriptures. Certainly he read some Scriptures like Isaiah 7:14, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." This describes Mary's situation exactly. He's realized that Immanuel is coming. God is with us. Mary's child is special!

There were certainly other Scriptures that he considered. One may have been Malachi 3:1, "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me." This is close to what the angel said to him about his own son. He will prepare the way before the coming of the Lord. Then, Zechariah considered that his son will be six months older than Mary's son. He will prepare the way.

Then, the day came for Elizabeth to give birth. Indeed, it was a son! In those days, there was no ultrasound to know beforehand the sex of the child. Had the child been a girl, all would have been proven to be false. But it was a son. And Zechariah believed.

At the circumcision of his son, Zechariah insisted that his name be "John," just like the angel had told him it would be (Luke 1:63, 13). And immediately (as verse 64 tells us), "his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he spoke, blessing God" (Luke 1:64). Then, we see Zechariah's prophesy in verses 68-79. Verse 67 sets the scene, ...

Luke 1:67

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,

Then, he speaks, first about Jesus (verses 68-75). Then he speaks about John (verses 76-79) He says this, ...

Luke 1:68-75

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people
and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us
that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

His words are saturated by the major themes of the Bible. God is a redeeming God (verse 68), who is bringing salvation (verse 69) through the house of David (verse 69). All praise and honor and blessing is due his name (verse 68). God will save us from our enemies (verse 71), showing us mercy (verse 72) according to his promises to Abraham (verses 72-73). God will save us to serve him (verse 74) in righteousness all our days (verse 75).

That is clear gospel truth. It's not that Israel was sufficient to save themselves. They were lost and in darkness as they walked in their own way. But God broke through in his mercy, according to his promises, sent a savior, who would redeem Israel from their sins.

This is the same gospel for us today. We can't save ourselves. We need God to save us. And the Savior, indeed has come. His name is Jesus. We need to trust in him!

Now, let's look more closely at what Zechariah says of his son.

Luke 1:76-77

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,

Zechariah was referencing his son, John. He prepared the way for Jesus. Remember how he was out in the Jordan river? Remember how he

was preaching to them "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). That is, a baptism that expresses your repentance. While in the Jordan he was preparing the way of the Lord,

Luke 3:4 (Isaiah 40:3)

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.'

You say, "Why was John going to do this?" Zechariah continues on, ...

Luke 1:78-79

because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

And here (finally) is where we see the theme of light in Zechariah's words. It's in his final words. After this, we hear nothing from Zechariah. This is what he wants to leave for us: a message of light.

Zechariah pictures his day as a sunrise (verse 78). What do you know about a sunrise? It comes after a long wait in a long night of darkness. It begins to break through, slowly, as it ascends over the horizon. More and more, the light becomes clear. Soon afterwards, you have the morning light. Soon, light is all around to let us see clearly. After a few hours, the sun is at full strength. At that time, we can see all clearly. Now when Zechariah spoke these words, the light of Christmas was just dawning. But it was dawning, so that we, who are walking in darkness and death, might be guided in the way of peace.

There are no better words for us this Christmas season than this year of 2020, that has faced so many problems and difficulties and hardships. Christmas is light to help us through this and give us hope, so that we don't stumble and fall and struggle and strive. Christmas is a reminder to put our hope in the Lord.

We have seen (1) Zechariah (Luke 1:5-23; 57-79). Now, let's turn our attention to ...

2. Simeon (Luke 2:25-32)

We read of his story in Luke, chapter 2. Let's pick up the story in verse 22. At this point, Jesus was born. He had been circumcised. So we read, ...

Luke 2:22-24

And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons."

According to Leviticus, chapter 12, this was probably some 40 days after Mary gave birth. So, Jesus is still a baby. He's sleeping most of the day. He isn't able to walk or talk. He's not even able really to focus his eyes.

She brings this baby to the temple and meet a man named Simeon. We know nothing about him, but what is told us in verses 25 and 26.

Luke 2:25 -26

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

Simeon was a righteous man, which means that he was walking in accordance with the law and worshipping the Lord. He was certainly serving the Lord by serving others. Simeon was also a devout man, which means that it was no accident he was in the temple on that day. Devout men love God and the people of God and are engaged in the work of God.

He may have been a prophet, as the Holy Spirit revealed to him directly that he would not die until he had seen the Christ. Because of this revelation, he was "waiting for the consolation of Israel" (verse 25). That is, he was waiting for the Messiah to come and restore Israel.

Simeon may have also been a priest, because Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to be blessed in the temple. Simeon, seemingly took up that priestly role of blessing the child. We read in verse 27, ...

Luke 2:27-28

And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

And here's what he said, ...

Luke 2:29-32

"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation

that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel."

In effect, Simeon says, "I can die now, because I have seen the Christ." This statement probably demonstrates that Simeon is an older man, for a younger man probably wouldn't say that he is ready to die so soon after seeing the Christ. We often think of Jesus revealing himself as the Messiah during his ministry, first to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) and later to Peter (Matthew 16). But here, when he is just over a month old, Simeon prophesies that he is the Christ.

This is the baby that we celebrate at Christmas. He is the Christ! He is Jesus! Again (in verse 32), we hear the message of light. Just like Zechariah prophesied of the dawning of the new age of the Messiah, so also does Simeon. He says that the light has come. He says that it has brought salvation (verse 30) in accordance with all that God had prepared (verse 31).

Note again how Simeon describes this light. It is "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." This salvation is for both Jews and Gentiles! This comes to us! The gospel isn't only for the Jews. It's for us as well. God has prepared it to be so from the very beginning of the life of Jesus. In this we can rejoice.

I close with one final story about a hymn that we sing during Christmas. It comes from the life and pen of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.^[6] In 1861, he fell into depression, when his second wife Frances died. She had been sealing envelopes with hot wax when a flame caught her clothes on fire. Henry had rushed to her aid and tried to smother the flames. But by the time the fire was out, Frances had been burned beyond recovery. She died the next day. Henry, burned badly as well, was too sick to attend her funeral. The death marked a turning point in Longfellow's life. His physical appearance changed dramatically as he began growing his beard because the burns disfigured his face. Mentally, he sank into depression.

On Christmas day in 1862 he would record in his journal: "A merry Christmas' say the children, but that is no more for me."

In 1863, his son Charley, went off to fight in the Civil War, against his father's wishes. Longfellow feared for his son's future. In June, Charley came down with fever. Longfellow traveled several hundred miles from his home in Cambridge to Washington D. C. to bring him home for the summer. Charley went back to the battlefield in the fall. In November, Charley's unit was engaged in a battle and he was shot. The bullet went through him from back to shoulder, just nicking his spine. Longfellow traveled to Washington again to retrieve his son from the hospital. They arrived back at their Cambridge home on December 8, and a grim Longfellow set about the months-long process of trying to nurse his son back to health.

As Christmas drew near, the bell towers in the churches began to play some Christmas tunes. He found in them a message that peace would come again to the troubled nation. They inspired him to write the poem, "Christmas Bells." This is a hymn that is often sung at Christmas time. I include the text with some comments.

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

In this stanza, Longfellow sets up the context of his writing this poem. It was the church bells being played on Christmas. The tunes were so familiar that the words repeated over and over in his mind. One over-arching theme of the hymns are "of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

I thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

This stanza speaks of how Christmas Day had come. Leading up to that day, the bells were relentlessly playing their tunes. They continued on, without stoppage, putting forth their message of peace and good-will without fail. Yet, the message found dissonance in Longfellow's mind.

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said:
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Longfellow was thinking about the realities of the Civil War. It was horrible. It split the nation. It stirred up anger and hate. The constant conflict meant that peace was absent on the earth. He envisioned the reality mocking the content of the song. The tunes proclaimed peace, but reality was conflict on every side. But the constant drone of the songs never stopped.

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
The Wrong shall fail
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men!"

The songs continued on! Their message never faltered. They continued to remind all of the listeners of God's reality. Sure, it may look like with wicked are prospering, but the Christmas songs insisted that God's justice will prevail in the end. The wrong will fail and the right will prevail!

Then ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

This is the light that comes, when night is transformed into day. It will come with singing and joy. It will come.

This is the light of Christmas.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on December 6, 2020 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/12/04/many-republicans-think-election-was-fixed-thats-what-losing-partisans-often-think/>.

[2] See <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/christmas-truce-of-1914>.

[3] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_truce.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Here's a good video documentary of the event with interviews of some of the soldiers who were there.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WgPi_me1p4.

[6] I have quoted freely from the following article:
<https://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/heard-the-bells-christmas-day-hope-surfaces-despair/>.