

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – December 9, 2018

[Luke 1:68-79](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Luke 1:68-79 (From *Homiletics*; “The Human Factor”, December 6, 2009)

Compared to Mary’s *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55), Zechariah’s *Benedictus* (vv. 68-79) is typically afforded a more modest role during Advent. Yet it is, arguably, the capstone of Luke 1. The validity of this claim is based on the way Luke wrote and divided Zechariah’s prophecy into two unmistakable sections.

The first portion of the *Benedictus* (vv. 68-75) echoes Mary’s *Magnificat* and also resonates with Elizabeth’s words of thanksgiving. The connection to both Mary and Elizabeth is apparent in Zechariah’s opening declaration: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, / for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them” (v. 68). On the one hand, Zechariah’s initial words of blessing are about the favor God has shown and will show to the nation of Israel, repeating a theme that Luke emphasizes in the early part of his gospel (cf. Luke 2:40, 52; 4:19; 7:16). On the other hand, Zechariah’s proclamation also concerns the favor God has shown to Elizabeth and Mary, two seemingly inconsequential Judean women. Elizabeth praises God because “he looked favorably on [her] and took away [her] disgrace” (Luke 1:25); Mary’s “soul magnifies the Lord ... for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant” (vv. 46b, 48a; cf. v. 30).

Even though the link with Mary and Elizabeth is noticeable from the outset, Zechariah’s attention returns to national interests when he says, “He has raised up a mighty savior for us / in the house of his servant David, / as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, / that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us” (vv. 69-71). The “mighty savior” (κερας σωτηριας — i.e., “a horn of salvation”) recalls the psalmist’s words: “The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, / my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, / my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold” (Psalm 18:2; cf. Psalm 89:17; 132:17). But even here, Zechariah’s words subtly affirm a portion of Mary’s *Magnificat*, for “the Mighty One” saved his people when “he scattered the proud” and “brought down the powerful from their thrones” (vv. 49-52).

As Zechariah continues to praise God, his words not only recount the Lord’s rescue of Israel but also display a conspicuous connection with Mary’s *Magnificat*. When Zechariah extols the Lord — “Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, / and has remembered his holy covenant, / the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, / to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, / in

holiness and righteousness” — he clearly acknowledges Mary’s prior avowal of God — “He has helped his servant Israel, / in remembrance of his mercy, / according to the promise he made to our ancestors, / to Abraham and to his descendants forever” (Luke 1:54-55; cf. Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:5-7; 17:1-8; 22:15-18; 28:3-4, 13-15). But whereas Zechariah hopes to serve God “without fear” (v. 74), which indicates that Zechariah undoubtedly recalls his terrifying encounter with Gabriel, the Lord’s angel, as well as the following nine months when he couldn’t speak (vv. 12-23), Mary declares in contrast, “His mercy is for those who fear him” — that is, for anyone who believes what is spoken by the Lord (vv. 45, 50). To be sure, both perspectives of fear and the myriad of emotions between the two inculcate the range of human response to God’s mercy.

The second portion of the *Benedictus* (vv. 76-79) takes up the neighbors’ question, “What then will this child become?” (v. 66). As Luke narrates Zechariah’s answer, he loosely rehearses Gabriel’s previous announcement to Zechariah about John’s birth and Elizabeth’s greeting when she went to visit Mary. He also builds on a number of ancient prophetic expectations.

In response to the neighbors’ query, which was prompted by the unusual circumstances surrounding the child’s conception (vv. 8-23) and the unfamiliar name given to him after his birth (i.e., “John” vv. 59-63), Zechariah declares, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; / for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways” (v. 76). “With the spirit and power of Elijah” — that renowned prophet of old (v. 17a; cf. Malachi 3:1) — the lad will go before and serve “the Son of the Most High” (v. 32). He “will go before the Lord to prepare his ways” — that is, “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (v. 17b; cf. Luke 3:4; 7:27; Isaiah 40:3). “He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God” (v. 16). He will complete this task, because — like his mother and father before him — he will be “filled with the Holy Spirit” (cf. vv. 15, 41, 67). The child will also “give knowledge of salvation to his people / by the forgiveness of their sins” (v. 77) — understanding and forgiveness that arise when “the hearts of parents [turn] to their children, and the disobedient [turn] to the wisdom of the righteous” (v. 17).

Zechariah also declares that when these things happen, it will be “[b]y the tender mercy of our God” (v. 78a). It will be a time when “the dawn from on high will break upon us, / to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” (vv. 78b-79a). Zechariah’s statements about his son and what his birth means reverberate with God’s promises and the people’s hopes uttered long ago both by the psalmist and by the prophet Isaiah: God’s people will be rescued from their darkness and from the valley of the shadow of death (cf. Psalm 107:10-16; Isaiah 42:6-7, 16).

And not only will “the dawn from on high” overcome the realm of darkness, he will also “guide our feet into the way of peace” (vv. 78b, 79b). This is because the birth of John signals the coming birth of “a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11). He is the one about whom the angels will sing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, / and on earth peace among those whom he favors” (Luke 2:14). He is the “Peace in heaven” who will come and say to his disciples, “Peace be with you!” (cf. Luke 19:38; 24:36).

That Zechariah’s *Benedictus* is the grand finale of Luke 1 seems obvious, given how Luke combines and integrates the events surrounding Mary’s *Magnificat* and John’s birth. But more than that, Zechariah’s *Benedictus* is also an anticipation of the entirety of Luke’s gospel as he narrates the events of Jesus’ life. For Jesus is, according to Luke, the one who rescues all people from darkness and “guides [their] feet into the way of peace.”

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.

Reflection Questions on Luke 1:68-79:

1. As a canticle on the birth of John, not Jesus, this passage could be viewed as high praise for Jesus' warm-up act. And while John holds a regular place here on the second Sunday of Advent in the lectionary, John isn't generally a feature of our Christmas carols. So what is the significance of John's role in the Jesus story? Can we safely consider his story optional reading in the lead-up to Christmas?
2. If you know the whole story, you will remember that these are the first words Zechariah has spoken in over nine months! What do you think – are these the spontaneous words of a spirit-filled, over-joyed new father? Or a long-time coming prepared speech of a man who has had ample time to reflect on the history and traditions of his faith, the promises of God, and the role his boy will play in the story? Does one or the other of these options appeal to or resonate with you more? Why?
3. Many commentators note that these words on the lips of Zechariah were written by Luke to an audience reeling from the effects of the First Jewish-Roman War, the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and bearing the indignities of living under occupied rule. Given this context, how might our understanding of these words, replete with references to salvation from enemies (vv. 71,74)?
4. What does "the way of peace" mean for you? For us? Is it personal or corporate? Is a feature of our inner life or our communal life? Does it come as a gift or an outcome of our life of faith?

What questions do you have?

What do you "wonder" about when reading these passages?