

Worship at home

December 27, 2020

Gathering Hymn: #141 “Good Christians, all rejoice”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZjUOHkexOo>

(Roden Girl Choristers)

Opening prayer:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old.

Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!

Hymn: #151 “Lo, how a Rose e’er blooming”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQNlbjtgxqk>

(Fernando Ortega Music)

God's Word read and interpreted:

Four prayers for a Christmas life

The season of advent is a liturgical tool intended to help us prepare for the coming of the Lord in community and also in the privacy of our homes, hearts, and minds.

We prepare for his coming in his nativity.

We prepare for his coming at the fulfillment of salvation history
when heaven and earth are fully and completely wed.

We prepare for his continual coming in all the ups and downs of daily living.

Now that the feast day of Jesus' birth is past, the season of advent has given way to the 12-day season of Christmas which lasts until Epiphany on January 6th. During this season, it behooves us to consider how we might continually awaken to our Lord's presence and power.

It should come as little surprise that I'm going to suggest a key tool in our discipleship toolbox is prayer. The witness of scripture testifies that prayer has always been the first resource for God's children in navigating everything from wedding feasts to political upheaval, from military campaigns to creating peaceful homes. A significant portion of the first two chapters of Luke's gospel is occupied by such prayers offered by men and women of faith such as Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, a devout man named Simeon, and an elderly prophet named Anna.

On this Sunday after the feast of Jesus' birth, I want to highlight four of these prayers.

1. I'll begin with the opening verses of what has come to be known by its Latin translation: The Magnificat:

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.*

~Luke 1:46-49

This is a prayer of awareness. Mary's life had taken an unexpected turn, yet in the midst of the chaos that pregnancy can be, she recognized God's hand at work. "He has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant." "The Mighty One has done great things for me." Mary was aware of and awed by how God had involved her in his great work of redemption.

This prayer urges us to honest reflection and to awareness of God's grace present in all seasons of our day and calls us to such gratitude that our children and grandchildren will recognize God's grace in us.

The second thing to highlight is the prayer's opening statement: "My soul *magnifies* the Lord." A magnifying glass creates an expanded image of an object. If you look at a tiny insect under a magnifying glass you are able to see details and colours you wouldn't with the naked eye. However, the magnifying glass doesn't create the insect itself, nor place the colours on its wings. It can only enlarge what is already there.

The prayer is not to create the Lord, or to create the Kingdom of Heaven, or to create world peace, but rather to make visible that which is already present. As Mary demonstrated so faithfully, our job as Christmas people is to put aside our pride, our ambition, our egos, and yield our whole self to the Power of the Most High. By our simple act of being – by our words, our body language, our actions, and our thoughts – we then magnify the Lord who is already present and doing great things for us by the mystery of the incarnation and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Which brings us to the second prayer, also by Mary:

2. *Here am I, the servant of the Lord;
let it be with me according to your word.
~Luke 1:38*

Mary prayed these words after her conversation with the angel Gabriel in which she was informed that she would become the mother of God. When we take this prayer seriously, it might offend our 21st century North American mindset because it is a prayer of *yielding* to the Power of the Most High. It recognizes the existence of a living and able deity whose ways and means are the only way to wholeness and peace. It also recognizes the human tendency to get in the way of God's work of redemption even as God works in partnership with humanity. And so, this is a prayer that gives up our own power and ambitions and submits to the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit.

It's a prayer of yielding and availability. Yet in that submission there is a blessing of contentment: In whatever moment I find myself, here am I; do with me what you need to testify to the presence of your kingdom and your holy self, born in Jesus Christ.

3. The third prayer is known as Zechariah's song. These are the first recorded words that Zechariah spoke after his nine months of silence which was broken when he wrote on the tablet that his son's name was John. John is the abbreviated form of the Hebrew name *Jehobanan* meaning "The Lord has shown favour." His very name is a statement of assurance. And the prayer is in the same vein:

*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty saviour 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.
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 before him all our days.
~Luke 1:68-75*

With the birth of the Christ child, Yahweh's ancient promises have been fulfilled and His words proven true.

I think, in our present context of lockdown, that it is worth highlighting the line: "he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors ... to grant us that we, being rescued from our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days."

The enemy doesn't win because we are forced into lockdown,
the enemy wins when our souls cease to magnify the Lord;
when our spirits cease to rejoice in God our Saviour.
The enemy wins when our testimony
bears witness to fear, to anger, and to finger pointing.

Life is not easy at the moment; yet, it is for such a time as this that "God sent us salvation that blessed Christmas morn."

And so, the second part of Zechariah's prayer which he spoke to his newborn son:

*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*

*by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.
~Luke 1:76-79*

With the incarnation of Jesus, with his sacrificial death on the cross, comes forgiveness of sin. We can receive the benefits of it when we accept his grace in faith. The implication of the assurance of the first part of Zechariah's prayer is that God is trustworthy which means God's ways of revealing to us His will and directions is trustworthy. Accepting his grace also means yielding to the Power of the Most High and following His Way revealed for us in the written words of scripture. Learning God's word and imitating Jesus' life leads our feet into the way of peace. Thus we are enabled by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to withstand the fear propagated by the Enemy and instead give knowledge of salvation by grace-filled speech and grace-filled behaviour.

Which segues to the fourth prayer. A prayer of peace and contentment throughout life and even into death:

4. *Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.
~Luke 2:29-32*

This final prayer was spoken by an aged man named Simeon who lived in Jerusalem. We know nothing about Simeon other than he was a righteous and devout Jew and that he had been assured by the revelation of the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. At this point, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus have travelled to Jerusalem as was the custom 40 days after the birth of a child, to make a sacrifice of purification and rejoin the worship life of the community. Simeon entered the temple, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. When he saw Mary and Joseph with their child, he knew this was the Messiah. Having seen the Messiah, he was ready to die in peace.

The prayer of Simeon is often used in Evensong services as one of the last prayers of the day.

The Messiah has been born. He has been crucified and resurrected. He lives now at the throne of heaven interceding on our behalf and ruling his church. Those who see with the eyes of faith live with the assurance that even death cannot separate us from our God. Let our prayer be: I have seen God's salvation in Jesus Christ, let me now rest in peace. Every day and every night until we close our eyes for the final time while we wait in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life.

These four prayers, spoken in response to the incarnation of the Lord, are valuable resources for a life of discipleship. They encourage us to live with our eyes of faith fully open – to recognize what God is doing in our midst. They remind us as we start each day that we become partners with God in his great work as we yield to the Power of the Most High and submit to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They are prayers of assurance and purpose. They are prayers of contentment and peace.

These are the prayers of people who live by faith. People who navigate crisis and change with the resiliency and grace that is a gift from the child born in the city of David – the Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord: Jesus of Nazareth.

May they become our prayers this Christmas season,
for the good of our souls,
for the peace of our homes,
and for the glory of the Holy Trinity.
Amen.

Hymn: #133 “Go, tell it on the mountain”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_GgZsUyzHA

(The Petersens)

Closing prayer and blessing:

Lord, now let your servants depart in peace, according to your word;
for our eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.
May the Lord bless us and keep us,
may the Lord be kind and gracious to us,
may the Lord lift up his face upon us,
and grant us peace.
Amen.