

Message: "The Hallmarks of Old Prophecies"

Scripture Lesson: Luke 1:68-79

⁶⁸"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. ⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

My son is the proud owner of a 2000 model year S-Type Jaguar, a rather fancy sportscar with a 281 horsepower, 4.0 litre V-8 engine, leather seats, a stereo system to die for - and a host of mechanical problems that we're discovering are both expensive and timely to repair. Some of those problems required professional attention, so we made an appointment to have an auto-repair shop work on the car. On the appointed day, we got the car down to the repair facility. And then we waited. And waited. And waited. We waited for over a month, with no word from the facility on what was taking so long. Do you know what such waiting does to the mind of a young car owner? Or the father of a young car owner? Such waiting is usually not a good sign. In any event, a call finally came from the mechanic, who said the car was ready - with no explanation for the delay, nor any statement of the expenses for the repairs mentioned. Our worry factor quadrupled as we headed down to the repair shop to find out what we didn't know, and to retrieve and pay for his car.

Now, I need to let you know something you may not know about me as a father, but I'm hip; I get it. There comes a time when a child is no longer a child; they become an adult on their own, and it is one of the most unfashionable of things in the world for a parent to continue acting like a parent in their presence. In other words, it is quite normal for the child to want to do things for themselves. I have become accustomed to having my children very politely refuse my company for the sense that they can manage quite well on their own (possibly they are thinking of the embarrassing things I might say? Or that my manner is.....out of date? I find it hard to believe, too!). Terri and I are very blessed that

they are indeed managing things very well - and though we are not offended that they no longer need our parenting skills as they once did, we do feel a little sense of loss over not being as involved as we once were. (can any parents out there relate?)

So it was with a fair amount of surprise when I was driving my son down to the repair shop to drop him off that he asked me, "Dad, would you mind coming in with me?" The rest of the world continued in its busy ways, but I for one could hear a pin drop. Not an earth-shaking moment by any measure to anyone but me, for my son was saying he didn't want to do this alone. He needed company - and I was delighted to comply.

I registered two sentiments in that moment, one in myself and one in my son. For me, I sensed the gratification of knowing I was needed; for my son, the sentiment was much more significant; it seemed that he sensed the reassurance that one need not do something alone.

The reason this experience comes to mind is that our scripture passage highlights the offer made to us on our behalf, but on a much more cosmological level. This passage from Luke 1 embodies what is called the Benedictus - it is the prophecy spoken by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, once he regains his speech at the news of his son's birth; he acknowledges God's handiwork to come through his son John, but also identifies a coming Messiah, one who will redeem and save and protect and forgive but most importantly make it possible for all to "serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days." These were the predictions "spoken through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old."

And what is the heart of this message from of old? In all of the prophecies, in all of the visions and predictions, in all of the messages throughout the ages of prophets ancient and modern, the message is the one we need most; Immanuel, God with us. But there is something deeper, more important going on here, especially in the Benedictus. It is not just that God is with us, but that God is for us. God is our advocate, a presence that seeks our welfare, that desires our fullness of life, that persists in loving us all. Jesus made this clear - we were not meant to ever be alone. It is precisely this understanding that faith attempts to instill, for it is precisely this truth that is the hope of us all.

How important this truth is in our times right now, for it can be argued that what we are experiencing in the world is a pandemic of isolation more than disease. Isolation from each other, yes, but more significant forms are obvious -

isolation from rationality, isolation from common sense, isolation from inclusion, isolation from what is true, isolation from what is good, isolation from understanding. And perhaps the root of it all is that we are very good at isolating ourselves from God. Our insistence on freedom, our determination to be independent, our passion for privacy, our efforts to do things our way.....might these tendencies bleed into our faith understanding, even to the point that we wind up isolating ourselves more and more from God - or even begin to create God in our own image? There is no stronger definition of a false god than one we create to fit our own personal reality.

The good news in all of this is that God remains God through it all; that is the prophecy of Zechariah, and the gift of the incarnation, that God has been with us, is with us still, and will be with us come what may. Yes, it is a platitude, easier to speak than to believe - but it is in the believing that God is revealed to be here, to be present, to be real. Prophecies do not mean much to those who choose not to listen, but to those who consider the possibilities they outline, they open the doorway to grace.

About 12 years ago, I was asked to be a "friend of the court" on behalf of a young man who had gotten in trouble with the law. My name came up to the judge presiding over the case because this young man was a friend of one of my daughters; he had been involved in a situation of self-harm, and went before the court as a form of intervention, seeking to redress his technically-criminal act which was really a desperate cry for help. Being a friend of the court in this instance simply meant being there as an advocate for the defendant - but I initially had trouble understanding what this might mean. I was asked to be present for the court session, but not instructed to do anything at all. So I went on the appointed date; I sat by myself, in a courtroom with the only other person in the room being the stenographer. After a few moments, the young man entered the room accompanied by his legal counsel. I remember him entering that space looking somewhat anxious; his eyes scanned the room until he saw me, when the faintest of smiles cross his face. The two of them took their seat; we all rose when the judge entered; he said a few things, and took a moment to introduce me to the court (which was all of three people), whereupon the young man turned to me again and smiled a weak smile. Then, the judge asked a few questions, whereupon the young man responded; the judge then mandated a program of probationary counseling in a secure facility, whereupon the young man and his counsel agreed. And then, gavel down, it was over. I never said a word, but

realized I didn't have to, for my presence was all they were looking for. To know that someone was on his side, that someone was not assessing or judging him, that someone showed up just for him, was worth everything.

Maybe that's the best way to understand our God - as someone who shows up. For us. For each one of us. At our best of times, and our worst of times. When we call upon him, and when we have forgotten to do so but need him nonetheless. God shows up - modeled in the most tangible, practical way in the incarnation, but made real in so very many other ways for those who are paying attention. God shows up in the smile and tears of grandchildren, in the conversations that extend in time due to a common affinity for things that matter, in the dance of nature in its seasonal melodies, in the intentional community of those working to address injustice, in those who have figured out that there is something grace filled in joining together simply for the sake of each other, be it family or friends or fellowship. God is there; God is here; God is with us; God is for us; we are never alone.