

Second Vespers in Advent

Bulletin

Audio

...to give light to those who sit in darkness, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

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Last week, as we pondered the Magnificat, we learned that it was necessary that the emptiness of Mary's virgin faith be present before the fullness of the Godhead would be manifested among us in Our Lord Jesus.

Now, as we ponder the Song of Zechariah, the Benedictus, we learn that it was necessary for all the world be overcome by darkness before the light of Christ would dispel the shadow of our sin.

Zechariah's world was in darkness. Zechariah is described in the Gospel of Luke as 'righteous, and blameless before God.' Our modern American notion of a righteous and godly person is one who is always taken by a sort of 'Christian joy,' who is always feeling 'blessed,' and perpetually being 'so thankful,' because of how good God has been to him or her. They feel 'close' to God and are always 'feeling His presence';

Righteous Zechariah would feel no such thing. He would feel only the forsakenness of his people by a God who once loved them; he would feel what the Egyptians long ago felt when they were struck by the plagues: *a darkness which could be touched.*

For over a thousand years before, God had betrothed himself to Abraham, and to all his offspring; He promised to bring out of his lineage a great people; the fruit of their loving union. This the Lord demonstrated when he liberated the Hebrews from the hand of Egypt, striking the mighty kingdom down with plague upon plague as a zealous husband would brutally cripple someone attacking his

beloved wife.

He took the Hebrews out of Egypt and led them through the Red Sea, the first baptism of God's people, their marriage with their Savior; and as a wedding present, He gave to the people of Israel the land of Canaan; a land flowing with milk and honey. Whatsoever His beloved people needed, God gave them, for His gratuitous love would withhold from them nothing.

But Israel was a harlot, and despised her Husband. She chose to whore after every idol in the land. The Israelites worshipped Ba'al, and Asharah, and Molech. They sacrificed blood and cattle and children to whatever demonic statue would promise them carnal pleasure.

And so God let them leave Jerusalem, the city of the Lord's peace; and gave them over to Babylon; the city of sin and pleasure; the city of the spirits of debauchery. Babylon came and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, and took the Israelites away as captives to lands far east. Only then, when they were ripped from their homeland; when they saw the house of their loving husband, whom they had neglected, destroyed with ram and fire; only when they were thrown before the massive images of monstrous false gods and commanded to either worship them or die; only then did they realize that what they thought was the freedom to worship many gods was in reality the slavery to many dark masters.

Now they were lost; they had no home; they had left their God, and it seemed that their God had left them; and rightly so. The Lord who loved them so much as to deliver them from Egypt by His mighty hand, they rejected; and so He had disappeared from their midst.

Generation upon generation of the people of Israel knew nothing but slavery, to a wicked people, and to their wicked gods. In the midst of their suffering, their God was absent. He did not seem to care if they suffered or not; if they lived or died. He did not care if their children were good or evil; whether or not they followed His statutes, or those of Ishtar. There was only one rational response: God had divorced them.

Then Babylon fell to Persia, and the Israelites were allowed to return to their homeland. They eagerly made the pilgrimage to the ruins of Zion. They were like a young bride, who after rebelling from the governance of her husband, runs off with some dead beat; and having spent years fornicating and shooting heroine,

realizes the ruin she has made of her life, and, so humbled, runs home, asking her beloved to take her back.

Only for Israel, the husband is not home. In fact their wedding nest itself no longer existed.

The darkness grows dimmer now; and even in their repentance, God seems not to hear their cry. Under the leadership of Nehemiah, they rebuild a new temple, a new house for their God. "Perhaps if He were given a splendid new home, God would realize how truly sorry we are; perhaps then He'll remember us; perhaps then He'll take us back...."

But the Temple was built, and the divine presence, the cloud of God's glory did not descend upon it as it had in ancient times.

A few prophets came, men who spoke in the Spirit of God; and these again rebuked Israel for her sin; they spat on the whorish people's unfaithfulness; and then, with the death of Malachi, God never spoke to them again.

For three hundred years, not a word was heard from the mouth of God. It was final; to the people of Israel, there was no God. They were forsaken; and in their forsakenness, they were enslaved first by Greeks, who desecrated their empty, pitiful temple with pig's blood and prostitutes, and then by Romans, who kept the rabble of Israel on a chain, humiliated like dogs on a leash. Now the darkness has overcome the day; now there is no glimmer of hope left to be clung to. To use the words of St. John: *And it was night.*

Herein lies the righteousness of Zechariah; not that he was feeling thankful and blessed, but that in feeling only complete cursedness, and having nothing to give thanks for, yet, as it is written: *he walked in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.* He lived by faith; a faith which clung to a single word; a faith which looked back in time, past the manifold idolatries and atrocities of Israel, past Israel's whoring and fornication and murder, past to the promise God made to his father Abraham two thousand years earlier, *that God would deliver them from their enemies, that they might serve Him without fear.* For, 'in ancient times he didst give the Law, in cloud and majesty and awe,' the holy Torah, wherein He declared that *God is not a man, that he should lie.*

The angel Gabriel announces to Zechariah that he in his old age will beget a son

who will prepare for God to *ransom captive Israel*. He cannot believe it, and in shock mutters words of doubt. And so Gabriel binds his mouth, so that he cannot speak until his son is born. It was not amid much murmuring and mourning that God would visit His people. It was not in the lamentation and weeping of Babylon that God returned to Israel. It would be in the silence of night, when no one speaks, that the Word of God would dawn in the east and enlighten the world.

St. Mary shows us that it is God's way to create only in utter emptiness; now St. Zechariah shows us that it is God's way to shine only in utter darkness. *For there is none like unto him. And our God is a jealous God.* For there is none with whom God might share in giving light to men, nor if there were would God allow it. No, only in the dark night of waiting, when men have lost hope in all things and have come to complete despair; only then will God 'reveal his sacred face.' Only then will 'He shine, the long-expected.'

Only then will He *give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of sins. Only then will He give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide their feet in the way of peace.*

Come with Zechariah, draw near to Christmas morn, to the nativity of our Lord, forsake the worldliness of Babylon; and enter Bethlehem, to the gates of the true Jerusalem, to lowly Mary in the manger. Come and see what we have heard from Jeremiah:

The Lord has created a new thing in the earth—a woman encompassing a man.

The Sun of our Lord's salvation, born of Mary and the cross, is dawning upon us.

Return, O Virgin Israel, Return to these your cities.

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Jeremiah 31:16-22; Luke 1:67-80.