

Title: Serving, without fear
Text: Luke 1.57-80
Theme: Praising God for his mercy
Series: Luke #6
Prop Stmtnt: Our lives exist to make much of God.

If you watched the Lions last Sunday, you know that they jumped out to a 21-0 lead before the 1st quarter was halfway over. Then, they seemed to just go into neutral and by the end of the 3rd quarter, many of us were thinking, “oh, here we go again.” Why do we think that way? We have been conditioned to think like this. We have been let down so many times that it is hard to have confidence that they are going to find a way to win rather than find a way to lose. That we can understand. But we tend to be that way with God. The tilt of our hearts is to trust ourselves instead of God. And yet, time after time after time, God has gone on record to make promises and then keep them in such a way that you would think that we would never be tempted to doubt God – ever again.

God is good command us to trust him because he is God and he is good. But then he proves his goodness and greatness to us repeatedly. Every time God makes and keeps a promise, our confidence should grow so much that we get to the point where we just know that somehow, someway, God will make a way. God will come through. God will do what he says. Unlike some of the holiday songs that talk about how, if you just believe, it will come true. Sorry, but that is not true. Look, if something is not true, believing in it does not change reality and make it true. Your believing has no power to change what is. God is true whether you believe him or not. God is faithful to keep his word, and we are simply idiots if we don't believe. What I find so beautiful and honestly, amazing is how kind and patient God really is. God gives us multiple reasons to believe him because he gives us multiple promises that he keeps.

Remember Psalm 103.14? “For he knows our frame.” He knows what we are made of. He knows that we tilt toward unbelief, so he works with us and brings us along. Even in this text, Zechariah refers to “the tender mercy of our God.” He links the promises of God to us to the mercies of God for us. This is our God. This is how he has revealed himself to us because this is how he wants us to relate to him, reflect him and enjoy him.

Read Text:

Next week we will start looking Luke chapter 2, which is the famous text on the birth of Christ. This account of the Son of God being born in a cattle stall, laid in a manger, and angels showing up to low-life shepherds who run to find him, has some pretty amazing and fascinating aspects to it. But that is not how the story begins. The first chapter of Luke is a long, running start that makes it clear that God is breaking into the world again. He does so by keeping promises and making more promises that he keeps. I want you to believe God so that you will love him and follow him with your whole being. Our text is just full of more reasons to believe God.

Do you remember Johnny's outline from his sermon last Sunday? He preached through the song of Mary and in many ways, this text is just like that text. I almost used his outline because much of it fit here as well. God is reinforcing something here for us. The event of Elizabeth and Mary meeting resulted in the Spirit's ministry and a hymn of praise. Here, the birth of John is the occasion for the Spirit's ministry and another hymn of praise. This birth event is special and the cause of rejoicing. But the birth event that comes in the next chapter is on a completely different level. Even now, we are being prepared for this. God is preparing us for what is about to do. Do you hear what I hear? Do you see what I see? Do you have a heart that is ready to believe?

1. **God's faithfulness displays God's mercy.** (57-58a)

God made a promise to Zechariah: Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. Elizabeth's pregnancy is the result of God's direct intervention. God is acting from a motive of love. When you hear mercy, think of actions that come from a heart of love because that is what mercy is. Now, if you found out that you were expecting and you immediately told everyone you could think of, but then lost your child, then if you got pregnant again, you are likely hesitant to tell everyone about this pregnancy as quickly as you did before. I don't know why Elizabeth stayed to herself for the first 5 months (v.24), perhaps this was a factor. For Zechariah and Elizabeth to have a son, is amazing. This event goes into the "almost too good to be true" column. But every week Elizabeth gets bigger, every time that baby kicks her in the ribs, keeps her up at night, gives her some indigestion, is another confirmation that she is good and pregnant, but then comes the birth. A lot of women died giving birth. Giving birth was going into the valley of the shadow of death. Our medical advances have taken a lot of the risk factors out, but this was not the case then. It was one of the reasons why pregnancies and births were almost community events. You wanted an army of people praying for you because no one assumed that either mom or child were going to come through this alive, especially when you were Elizabeth's age. And yet, the angel from God said it so clearly. "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son." And now, this too good to be true promise is true and it is good. "Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son." She got pregnant. She went full term. She gave birth. She bore a son. God has confirmed it again and again. He has acted from a heart of love.

God did exactly what he said he would do. God came through and their relatives and neighbors heard that the Lord had shown mercy to her. The birth of a son in her old age was rightfully seen as a display of God's mercy. This is what I want to bear down on for a second. I want you to stop and ponder this. God reveals himself to us in a personal way because he is a personal God. God makes promises to us so that we will believe him because believing him will cause our lives to be grounded, purposeful, meaningful, and ultimately eternally joyful because they are with him. God makes promises and he keeps them. God is faithful. He is faithful in his existence. He is faithful in his essence. He is faithful in his character. He is faithful in his actions. He is faithful in carrying out his plan and the primary way in which we know this is because over and over God makes specific promises and then he keeps them, so that we can look back and see these markers and proof positive of God. God does not have to do this. He could have caused Elizabeth to conceive without telling Zechariah ahead of time, but he told him ahead of time so

that Zechariah and Elizabeth would spend 9 months believing God more and more and finding more excitement in God and delighting in God. All of this is the mercy of God.

Since we are tilted toward disbelieving God, we need to stop and just think about the various ways in which God has been faithful to us and then let those evidences of God's faithfulness lead us to realizing that they come from a merciful God. What are some of the prayers that God has answered for you? What has God forgiven you of, delivered you from, changed you from, provided for you, and sustained you through.

I started driving my father-in-law's van last winter. I did not realize until March that it had a remote start. All winter long I could have been letting that thing warm up and then enjoying the drive from the moment I got in, but I didn't realize what I had. When we fail to consider the faithfulness of God, we fail to realize what we have and instead of enjoying the ride we tend to complain, like idiots when all along, we have so much. God's mercies are new and the cause for rejoicing.

2. God's mercy causes rejoicing. (58)

When do you rejoice? You rejoice when something good happens to you. Particularly when you are not expecting it. When you get paid for doing a job, you may be grateful (and should be), but you are probably not amazed, because, well, you expected to get paid. That is why you did the job. But, if you got a bonus, or a generous tip, or some kind of a windfall, then, you rejoice because something unexpectedly good happened. The relatives and neighbors rejoiced because God had shown mercy to her. Rejoicing is our response to amazement.

Why do you think we are commanded in Philippians 4.4 to rejoice in the Lord, always? God never gives us perfunctory commands. Remember Johnny's first point last week? "You should be moved to worship the Lord from the core of your being." Well, that is true about rejoicing. The command to rejoice is not a command to pretend. It is a command that is to be obeyed without hypocrisy from the core of our being. God is not glorified by fake rejoicing. In order for me to rejoice, I need to remember the mercies of God. I need to stop and consider what God has done and is doing for me even right now.

We deserve the judgment of God for our sin. We deserve the wrath of God for our rebellion. We deserve God's stinginess to us because we can be so stingy. We deserve for God to just take our feet out from underneath us because we tend to be so prideful and unthankful. But, instead of giving us what we deserved, God poured out his wrath against our sin on Christ when he died on the cross in our place. There is no wrath left for me to face, I get mercy. I am here thinking about God, loving God, singing about God, wanting to know God and knowing God because of the mercy of God. In fact the goodness and mercy of God are going to follow me all the days of my life and then, I am going to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. I don't deserve any of that. Therefore, no matter what happens, even if I am in prison, like Paul when he wrote the book of Philippians, I can rejoice because while this life is not forever, his mercies and the life to come is.

If you have lost your capacity for rejoicing, I am not telling you to suck it up and just fake it till you make it. Oh no, just stop and “think about his love, think about his goodness, think about his grace that’s brought us through....” Then, when you think about that, you will remember the amazing things that God has done. I am not where I deserve to be. I am experiencing what I deserve. And neither are you.

3. God’s faithfulness drives our obedience. (59-63)

For at least the last 9 months, Zechariah could not talk, and according to this text it sounds like he may not have been able to hear either. Remember he asked for a sign from God to prove that God was really going to keep this promise, as if God would make a promise that he wouldn’t keep. So, Zechariah got his sign. It was very ironic. The sign was another statement from God. If you won’t listen to me, then you won’t be able to listen to anyone because I want you to listen to me because what I tell you is for your good and for your joy. Obviously, Zechariah gets that now. He is not embittered about not being able to speak because, well, he asked for it.

Births and deaths were very communal events, even more so than how we observe things. Elizabeth gives birth and the whole place knows it and rejoices. Now, they show up 8 days later to circumcise the baby and name him. Now, this sort of blows our minds. Can you imagine all your relatives and neighbors showing up to circumcise your son and name him? I don’t think so! But it is helpful to understand that this is what marked every Hebrew boy as being in the nation and in order for him to be recorded as such, he had to have a name. And since many first-born sons were named after their dads or grandfathers, offering to name the boy Zechariah was sort of assumed and of course an honor. So, when they try to name him Zechariah, Elizabeth says, “No, he will be called John.” John? No one in the family is named John, so they make signs to Zechariah who procures a writing tablet and confirms what Elizabeth said. “His name is John.” In other words, it is already decided. His name IS John. By the way, John mean, God is gracious. Zechariah is not only obeying what he was told, but it is now very clear that his obedience is his response to the faithfulness of God. Zechariah is all in. For 9 months he witnessed the faithfulness of God. His response is to believe and name him, John.

1 Corinthians 15 is a mountain peak in the Bible. This towering text on the resurrection is my go-to passage when standing at the graveside. There, surrounded by markers and mausoleums I am tempted to yell, O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? I am tempted to yell this, even though I am surrounded by graves where it looks like death has not only stung, but death has won. But, 1 Cor 15 gives us the theology that supports the promise of Jesus who said, “Because I live, you shall live also.” Paul points out that just as Christ rose again and has an incorruptible, imperishable, honorable, glorious, powerful, so too, shall every follower of Christ. On that resurrection day, these graves, like the grave of Jesus will open because death is broken and cannot keep the jail secure. But, Paul then tells us that because of the guarantee of God’s faithfulness to his promise. Therefore, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. God is faithful to his promise and the ultimate promise is our resurrection. You cannot lose. You cannot lose. Abounding in serving

God is always a win. The faithfulness of God to his promises drives our obedience and secures our joy.

4. **Our faith-driven obedience will stand out.** (64-66)

At this point, Zechariah is able to speak and he does so by blessing God. The last time, Zechariah spoke he was doubting God's promise, and now, he is emphatically declaring God's faithfulness. What he says is recorded in verses 68-79. But all of these acts of God and Zechariah's and Elizabeth's responses to the faithfulness of God, certainly gets the attention of others. What happened to them and how they responded was the occasion for their neighbors to realize that something unusual was going on. One of the dominant themes of the Bible is how God chooses a people to stand out from this world and put him on display to the world. Simply put, the people who stand out, are those who stake their lives upon God, no matter what. This was supposed to be the story of Israel, but most of the time, the children of Israel resented this calling, rebelled against it and were a people who echoed the world instead of being a clear voice to it. Zechariah and Elizabeth do the unusual. They believe God and it causes wonder and gossip (in a good way). That is hard for many of you. You do not want to ruffle any feathers, or rock any boats. You just want to go along to get along, but while we are not to look for ways to draw undue attention to ourselves, if we are a people who believe God and are willing to live that way, we will stand out. This was the mission of their son John. He stood out. He spoke out. He said what needed to be said and in so doing, he fulfilled his purpose for life and here we see how his parents were setting the pace for that.

5. **The Spirit of God causes us to bless God.** (67-80)

In Mary's song she makes the connection between what God is doing with her to what he is doing in carrying out his purposes for the world. In Zechariah's song, he makes the connection with what God is doing in the world to the role that his son is going to play in that. The people were wondering in v.66, what then will this child be? And this Spirit-driven response answers that question. This song is motivated by the Spirit who uses all sorts of OT passages to create this hymn of thanksgiving and praise as well as give us a theology of God's plan. Don't miss the obvious. The Spirit of God uses the Word of God as a means for us to bless God. The Word is given to us in part so that we will know that God makes and keeps promises so we can bless him for that. The Word is also given to us so that we can see that God's promises are tied to his mercies. God's actions for his people are motivated by his love for his people. And the Word is also given to us so that we can see that God's promises are tied to his plan of redemption. All of God's promises are part of his unfolding plan for this world. He reveals his plan to us, piece by piece and those pieces are often promises for us to believe and watch come true.

So, when you step back from this hymn for a second you see this beautiful tapestry. God reveals himself in such a way that we see how lovely, good and sovereign he is and he gives us the Spirit SO that we see this and believe this with our hearts. God is committed to his plan and God is committed to making sure his people see it, believe it are blessed by it and live in it and according to it.

The song itself is like a funnel. It starts wide and praises God for keeping his big promise to visit and redeem his people through the house of David. God has not forgotten his people. He will save them and he will show mercy to them because of his covenant that he made. Look at vs. 74-75. The purpose of God doing this is so that he would have a people who would serve him in love (without fear) and would therefore be holy and righteous because they want to and love to, not because they have to. This is God's vision and plan for his people – forever! He deems to have a people who are so convinced in the love, integrity, goodness, mercy and glory of God that they long to serve him, long to love him, long to be with him, long to make much of him, and long to make him known. That is it!!

Then the song narrows to the role that John is going to play in that. And once again, the role that John plays, as hard as it is, and as short as it will be, is rooted in the tender mercy of our God (v.78). And then the hymn ends, as John's life will, pointing to Christ who will give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

We often talk about, where would I be without the Lord. It is one of the contributing reasons to people being owned by addictions, because life is hard and without the Lord, there is no hope. But there is the Lord to turn to and to know. But, can you imagine if we did not have the Lord? If we had no promises? No plan? No future? Nothing?! The emptiness and darkness and lostness is suffocating. But the Lord has come and he has done it such a way that like a series of emergency vehicles on the road, he has the sirens on at full volume and the lights flashing as brightly as possible. He has come so that he may be found, so that you may have joy. Trust him. He is worth it.