

## All Evidence to the Contrary

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, December 5, 2021, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Luke 1:68-79](#)

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Throughout the first few chapters of his gospel, Luke is setting the scene. Luke is playing an overture, introducing us to themes that we will hear in full verse as the drama unfolds. And right off the bat, we know something special is up because people who shouldn't be pregnant are pregnant.

Luke starts off by establishing the timeframe: Herod is king of Judea. Then Luke introduces us to two righteous people: Zechariah, a priest who serves in the Temple, and Elizabeth, a descendant of Aaron and so part of the priestly clan. They are married to each other and despite their righteousness before God, they have never had children.

Luke tells a wonderful story of Zechariah, in the midst of performing his priestly duties, meeting the angel Gabriel. Gabriel tells Zechariah that he and Elizabeth will have a child. Zechariah doesn't believe Gabriel—not because he's talking to an angel and finds that unbelievable, but because he and Elizabeth are old. Gabriel responds with a, "You don't believe me, huh? Well, shut your mouth!" and, zap, Zechariah becomes mute.

Zechariah's mutism lasts throughout Elizabeth's pregnancy and he isn't able to speak until their child is born and named John. When Zechariah finally does speak, he doesn't just speak—he sings. He sings the words Mike read to us just a moment ago.

I hear this prophetic song as having two parts. First, Zechariah sings about God, then he sings about his baby. The words about God are very much in the tradition of the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. The big difference is the tense of the verbs. The prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures typically speak in the present tense—we have turned away from God—or in the future tense—God will do this thing. Here, Zechariah sings of what God *has done*. God has looked favorably. God has raised up a mighty savior. God has shown mercy. Jesus isn't even born yet. He might be kicking Mary in the kidneys, but he's not born yet. And already Zechariah is singing about God's redemptive, salvific work in the past tense.

Then Zechariah turns to his baby. "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."

It's all so calm and bright you'd think that Zechariah had never read a newspaper, that he didn't know what was going on around him, that he was living in a bubble.

Not at all like the poet Edmund Sears who wrote the lyrics to "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear." If you were here last week, you heard me say that during Advent, we are singing a Christmas Carol that has a forgotten verse. Today we turn to "It Came Upon the

Midnight Clear.” The first verse of this carol seems an appropriate echo of Zechariah’s song. It comes from moment we read about in the Jesus birth narrative in Luke’s gospel.

*It came upon the midnight clear,  
That glorious song of old,  
From angels bending near the earth,  
To touch their harps of gold:  
‘Peace on the earth, good will to men,  
From heaven’s all-gracious King.’  
The world in solemn stillness lay,  
To hear the angels sing.*

By verse 3, as he originally wrote the carol lyrics, Sears turns to his contemporary world, claiming that the angels continue to sing their glorious song of old, their song of peace on earth, but we don’t hear them. I don’t know why most contemporary hymnals leave this verse out. It seems to me that it still rings true:

*But with the woes of sin and strife  
The world has suffered long;  
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled  
Two thousand years of wrong;  
And man, at war with man, hears not  
The love-song, which they bring:  
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,  
And hear the angels sing!*

Sears wrote these lyrics in the lead up to the American Civil War. He was pleading with his contemporaries to let God “guide their feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:79). 170 years later we still need to hush our noise of strife and hear the angels sing. The news from Oxford, Michigan, this past week made that clear: another school shooting, this one leaving four people dead.<sup>1</sup> And much closer to home in Campbell, just last weekend, gunshots rang out outside the football stadium where two high school football teams were playing a division championship game. While the shooting in Campbell does not appear to be related to either high school, the closeness of the gun violence is deeply disturbing.<sup>2</sup>

There are many ways we need to address our violence as a culture. One way we desperately need to do this is for us as a culture to confront and disempower the myth of redemptive violence, the myth that insists that we can be saved through violence. We cannot be saved through violence. Might does *not* make right. War does *not* bring peace.

The Angel song of peace and Zechariah’s song of peace—they point to the way of peace: love and justice. And perhaps that is why Zechariah can sing in the past tense, about

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Alisha Ebrahimji and Christina Zdanowicz, “Oxford school shooting victim’s brother: ‘Never in my life will I feel this pain again,’” *CNN*, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/01/us/michigan-oxford-high-school-shooting-victims-trnd/index.html> (posted 3 December 2021; accessed 4 December 2021).

<sup>2</sup> See Darren Sabedra and Jakob Rodgers, “Gunshots halt St. Francis vs. Serra CCS Division I championship game; two injured,” *The Mercury News*, <https://www.mercurynews.com/2021/11/26/gunshots-halt-st-francis-vs-serra-ccs-division-i-championship-game/> (posted 26 November 2021; updated 29 November 2021; accessed 4 December 2021).

what God has done. For God has redeemed us, God has saved us. And not with the warrior Messiah. Not with the violence of blood sacrifice. God has saved us with grace. God has saved us with love.

Sure, it seems like we haven't been saved. All the evidence points to the contrary. Humanity still wages war—and not only with other humans. As theologian Robert Shore-Goss points out, “Humanity, in general, does not live in peace with the Earth and the community of life [either]. Actually, we aggressively wage war with nature and the Earth. Our mode is to conquer, dominate, and extract resources in pursuit of greed. [Our] war mentality includes entitlement, domination, ownership, and power. It involves incursions, invasions, and conquest against nature”<sup>3</sup> as much as it does against nations.

In contrast to this, in his book *Nature as Spiritual Practice*, Steven Chase calls nature a “consummate conscientious objector.”<sup>4</sup> When we refuse to hear the angels sing, we are refusing to hear nature's cries that arise because we wage war, poison the earth, degrade ecosystems, and hasten the extinction of species after species. Shore-Goss challenges us to listen more closely to the songs of peace when he reminds us that, “From the Creator God's perspective, nature is alive, persona, intrinsically valuable, and especially, beloved.”<sup>5</sup>

So, with all evidence to the contrary, how can I sing with Zechariah that God has saved us? It's because my faith is a both/and faith. So often we think in either/or ways. We think that something is helpful or hurtful, but not both. We think that a person might be a victim or a perpetrator, but not both. We talk about someone presenting one side of an argument and then someone else presenting *the* other side—as if there were only two sides. But the fact is that we need both the darkness *and* the light. And the fact is that darkness and light are both holy *and* profane. The fact is that each of us is both sinner *and* saint and that our church is holy *and* imperfect.

My faith is filled with paradoxes like these. If I want to save my life, I must lose it. If I want to be first, I must be a servant. And so, I am comfortable embracing the truth that, despite all evidence to the contrary, we have been saved, that our feet are guided into the way of peace, even as we struggle to create that peace, a true peace that is, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, more than the absence of tension, a peace that is the presence of justice.<sup>6</sup>

Take a look at the communion elements you've prepared for worship today. A piece of bread (or something like it); a cup of juice (or something like it). Simple things. Ordinary things. And completely holy things. This sacrament is very familiar *and* very peculiar. Jay Johnson, an Episcopal Priest and theologian, says of communion, “One of the more peculiar things is this: we call it a ‘meal’ and sometimes a ‘feast’ but we receive only a tiny piece of bread and just a sip of wine.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Shore-Goss, “Intersection of Advent and Extinction Remembrance Day: A Eco-Reflection,” *Mischievous Spirit and Theology*, <http://www.mischievousspiritandtheology.com/intersection-advent-extinction-remembrance-day-eco-reflection/> (posted 30 November 2021; accessed 4 December 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Shore-Goss, *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> See Martin Luther King, Jr., “When Peace Becomes obnoxious,” *Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/when-peace-becomes-obnoxious-sermon-delivered-18-march-1956-dexter-avenue> (accessed 4 December 2021).

“That’s peculiar for good reason, because the Eucharist is not supposed to be satisfying. The word *eucharist* means ‘thanksgiving,’ but it’s not supposed to make us feel the way many of us do after a feast of roast turkey.

“The Eucharist turns on desire, not digestion. The rite is meant to reawaken our desire and sharpen our hunger, not just for more bread and more wine, but hunger for an end to poverty and homelessness; hunger for a flourishing planet of social and economic justice; hunger for that kind of communion with each other and with God that we have not yet enjoyed in its fullness.”<sup>7</sup>

And so I sing with Zechariah, “Blessed be God, for God has looked favorably on all people and redeemed us all. God has sent us a savior who speaks the truth of justice and peace, calling us to serve one another, creation, and God in holiness and righteousness. And by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high breaks upon us and guides our feet into the way of peace.” Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Jay Emerson Johnson, “Unsatisfied, Thankfully,” *Peculiar Faith*, <https://peculiarfaith.com/2011/11/24/unsatisfied-thankfully/> (posted 24 November 2011; accessed 4 December 2021).