



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



Paternal Prophetic Prose

Text: Luke 1:67-79

Rev. Dr. John E. Manzo

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There were some major news headlines that dominated my e-mail and news stories.

Nicole Richie was arrested for DUI. She did claim total responsibility for her actions. Perhaps this great act is tempered a bit since she was alone in the car.

Paris Hilton felt badly for her because Paris has been arrested this past September for having a DUI.

Brittany Spears was out on the town and wasn't, ahem, fully dressed to the delight of many photographers who took and sold pictures.

And Lindsey Lohan didn't have a drink all week.

We are a culture fixated on celebrities. And we are so fixated by celebrities that we often miss the fact that there are many obscure people who do amazing things that we often don't know anything about.

One of those people is a character in the Bible named Zechariah. Zechariah is one of the more obscure characters in the Bible.

Zechariah was a priest at the Temple. One day, while in the Holy of Holies Zechariah is encountered by an angel who tells him that Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, is with child and that child would be the prophet who would go before the Messiah and the child's name is to be John. As Elizabeth was past the age of child-bearing, Zechariah scoffed at this and was stricken mute by the angel.

Ninth months pass and the child is born. Everyone is gathered around telling Elizabeth that she can't name the baby John as there are no people in the family named John and this is simply not done. Finally Zechariah writes down the words, "His name is John," and his voice is restored. Then Zechariah sings the second of the four songs we find in Luke which tell us about the birth of the Messiah.

This famous song, or Canticle of Zechariah tells a story of promise to all.

Personally, this passage becomes particularly poignant because Zechariah turns to his son, the baby John, and says:

“And you my child shall be called the prophet of the most high God for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us and shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and guide our feet onto the way of peace.”

There are, to me, stories of God in this passage. We learn about the character of God.

First, God is a God of redemption.

For Zechariah this redemption is personal. He was a holy man of God and in the one test that God sent him, an angel, Zechariah failed.

A high school senior had bothered the director of the high school play for four years that he wanted a speaking part in the play. The director did not see any discernable talent in the young man, but finally relented and gave the kid one line in a play.

The line was this. “Hark! The cannon roars!” The director said, when you hear the cannon fire, just say, “Hark! The cannon roars!” and it will be great.

The kid was so excited and everywhere he went he said the words over and over again. “Hark! The cannon roars!”

Finally on opening night the play is going along perfectly, the youth is sent out on the stage in an elaborate costume at the right time, a loud boom is heard throughout the theater and the young man said, “What the heck was that?”

His big opportunity and he messed up.

The same is true for Zechariah. He had served God his whole life and he prepared his entire life to enter the Holy of Holies to offer sacrifices to God and an angel of the Lord appears to him and Zechariah messes up.

But God is a God of redemption. Zechariah is stricken mute, but ultimately he turns back to God, does what he has been told to do, and his voice returns. He realizes that God has redeemed him and he gives thanks.

Secondly God is a God of hope and tender compassion.

Sometimes in the rushing around before Christmas and the festivities of Worship, we miss the underpinnings of the story of Christmas in the fact that birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise that God would send a Messiah, a Savior into the world.

The words of Zechariah in the beginning of the Canticle, "He has come to his people to set them free," is a reminder to us that God is a God of hope.

And that hope comes because God is a God of, as it is said here, *tender compassion*. Not just compassion, but tender compassion.

It has become fashionable to say that people don't grapple with sin any more. Society has become an everyone does what they want to do and no one is bothered by worrying about sin any more.

Sin is about turning our backs to God, it is about doing something that is wrong, it is ultimately about failing. So often those failures, those short-comings, those weaknesses we have take place because we feel on bondage to failure, to weakness, even to sin.

We speak of salvation and Zechariah speaks about knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of sins, and we don't always get the full meaning because we have a limited understanding of the way the word salvation is used in the Bible.

Most people, if you asked them, would say that salvation is that when we die we are saved by grace and go to Heaven. In the Bible, salvation was more than that. There was the promise of eternal life with Christ. But salvation also meant freedom from the Romans. It meant freedom from death. It meant freedom from the bondage of sin.

Bondage of sin is such a strong concept and one that still plagues people.

I said before that it is fashionable to say that people don't really grapple with sin and weakness any more, but we do. If you ever go to the self-help sections of book stores you won't notice books entitled, *Learning Humility*, or *Humility for Dummies*, or, *You're Not as Awesome as You Think You Are.* Most people don't struggle with feeling awesome about themselves, but most people grapple to their core with their weaknesses, their short-comings, and yes, the sin. And so often people feel trapped.

But we are told that God is a God of tender compassion, who sends his Son to free us from bondage and give us hope.

The song of Zechariah is a song that teaches us amazing things about God.

It reminds us that God is a God of redemption. Zechariah was a person in need of redemption. He had failed, but when he turned around and chose that which was right, and was

obedient to God, he found immediate redemption. People may hold grudges, but God doesn't.

It reminds us that God is a God of hope and tender compassion, one who understands that we are so often trapped in bondage and so Jesus came, to set us free from that bondage.

Zechariah may not be a celebrity, and he may not even be the most famous person in the Bible. His words, however, enable the heart of God to reach out and touch our hearts and change us forever.