



THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

December 2, 2012

'We Rejoice at the Beginning of a New Church Year'

Sermon Text: Luke 1:57-79

"Now Elisabeth's full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son. And her neighbours and her cousins heard how the Lord had shewed great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her. And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father. And his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John. And they said unto her, There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name. And they made signs to his father, how he would have him called. And he asked for a writing table, and wrote, saying, His name is John. And they marvelled all. And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God. And fear came on all that dwelt round about them: and all these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judaea. And all they that heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be! And the hand of the Lord was with him. And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began: That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; The oath which he sware to our father Abraham, That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, In holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life. And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Fellow Redeemed in Christ Jesus, Amen.

Today is the First Sunday in Advent. As Christians we stand on the threshold of a new church year, almost thirty days before most of the rest of our world observes the beginning of a new calendar year for the secular world.

Now, there are indeed certain similarities between a new *church* year and a new *secular* year, however the **differences** are far more pronounced.

The first is spiritual in nature, the latter – temporal.

As Christians, our concern at this new beginning is *not* with the flightiness of short-lived temporal New Years resolutions – resolutions made with without any real conviction – such as the world encourages every year. Nor are we concerned with any trials or tribulations we might face in the new calendar year. Rather our concern is – first and foremost – with that which is *spiritual*. For that which the Christian knows concerning the future of both his body and soul by the Spirit of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ is *very much certain* and a source of constant, unending joy.

Today We Can (and Do) Rejoice at the Beginning of a New Church Year, because we know:

- I. God keeps His promises,**
- II. God gives us strength to serve Him, and**
- III. God guides us in the Way of Peace.**

As our sermon text relates, The birth of the child promised to Zacharias and Elizabeth had finally come. At the birth of that child, any doubt that Zacharias had concerning the possibility of he and Elizabeth successfully having a child at such advanced age evaporated. Moved by the Holy Spirit, Zacharias expresses his faith in a hymn of praise and thanksgiving, because he realized that God had kept not only the promise concerning his own son, but was about to fulfill the many other promises concerning the salvation of all of Israel.

Listen now, as with exalted words Zacharias reviews the revelation the God of Israel had sent through Abraham, David, and other of God's holy prophets...

(We read verse 68-79.)

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began: That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; The oath which he sware to our father Abraham, That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, In holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life. And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

See how lovingly Zacharias recalls to mind the oath God swore to Abraham – the mercy and salvation which God had promised throughout the long centuries of the past.

Should it come as any surprise to us that Zacharias should be filled with such joy at the beginning of a new era with the promise of God's grace flooding his very mind and soul?

Today, God has brought us once again to the beginning of a new church year.

Given the fast pace with which we live our daily lives and the worldliness that has managed to creep into our minds and set up housekeeping there, it is natural for us to feel timid about expressing the same such joy as Zacharias. But, My Dear Friends, let us look to God and His Word of Promise to us. Let us sincerely meditate on the fulfillment of our dire need of the Savior in Christ Jesus and we shall be moved to share in the same joy Zacharias experienced as a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Let the Gospel Message sweep all doubt and trepidation away from your minds. Let all worry and fear of the future be removed from your hearts and let them be filled and overflowing with joy – *yes, real unbounded joy* – because our God, our merciful loving God, who never changes, will fulfill all His promises to you.

This you can believe!

Just as none of His promises to His children fell unfulfilled to the ground in the Old Testament – in spite of all the worldly reasoning and actions of sinful man – so none will prove ineffective now. God, Himself has promised to free us from sin, from an evil conscience, from the power of the devil, from damnation, and from eternal death, *not* on the basis of what you or I could ever even hope to merit or by what we may work out with the human reasoning of our minds – *for indeed we deserve nothing but His righteous wrath and punishment on account of our many sins* – but solely out of The Father's divine goodness and mercy He has accomplished this for us in Christ.

Yes, the complete reconciliation between God and the whole world Our Lord Jesus accomplished through His sinless life on this earth and His innocent suffering and death upon the Cross of Calvary in our place – that holy sacrifice given *once and for all* – which was sealed and approved by our heavenly Father and evidenced in the empty tomb of our Risen Jesus and the many appearances to His disciples on Easter morning are God's everlasting guarantee to all mankind that His promises to us are sure.

And so, **Rejoice!** and again I say **rejoice!** as you begin a new church year!

Now Zacharias, the priest, was, as Luke chapter one, verse six reads: "*...righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.*" 'Blameless' here means that he had served God without fear, but in holiness and righteousness.

There were undoubtedly, a number of occasions in the past when a strong temptation to deviate from the commands and ordinances of God arose within Zacharias. But Zacharias, by the grace of God had stood firm in his public and private life and now that he realized that God had made him the father of the prophet of Most High – the father of this child who was to prepare the way of the Redeemer – his joy in the coming Messiah increased and grew even stronger. With the strengthening of his faith and a renewal of energy rising up within him, Zacharias boldly faced the enemies of his soul and fearlessly served God. He did not waiver on the threshold of a new era – and neither should we – but He moved forward in even greater service to God. In like manner we ought to rededicate our time, our talent and our gifts in service to God and our fellow man.

As Christians, you and I have served God this past year in various ways – each according to our God-given stations in this life. Even so, we must honestly confess we have often fallen into sin and so failed in all our efforts to keep His commandments. For the many temptations of the devil, the world's seducing invitation to wallow in the muck of sin included in the cares and worries of this present life, and the lust of our own sinful flesh, have led us all at times to succumb to our Old Adam's natural desire to forget God – to set Him aside like some forgotten trinket locked in a little box somewhere – and to reason within ourselves what path forward in life we might choose for ourselves rather than depend upon Him alone for guidance.

Dear Christians, you and I stand at the beginning of a new church year today. These old enemies will again and again work as hard as they can to make us forget any notion of God and invite and encourage us to depend only upon others and on ourselves and what *we* believe we can accomplish in and of ourselves in life's daily struggles.

But look here! Our Most Holy God says,
"Serve Me without fear in holiness and righteousness all the days of your life!"

Can we do it? Certainly.

Not because of anything you or I can do of our own accord, but *because God's promises are true and because He gives us strength to serve Him.*

Because of faith worked in your hearts by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, you can begin to fear and love and trust in God above all things and to love your neighbor as yourself and hence you can grow in service to God and your neighbor – to grow in your sanctification toward God – in this life.

And *because God's promises are true*, you can do all these things without fear. For it is God Himself that supplies His children with all necessary fortitude and strength of mind, body and spirit and forgives us all our shortcomings in the Gospel – His Word of Truth. Indeed, we have His gracious and perpetual promise that He will sustain us in the faith as well.

And so, Dear Friends, ***Rejoice with exceeding great joy in Christ your Savior! And again I say Rejoice!***

Now for many, many years Zacharias, the priest, had labored diligently. He poured out himself into humble service unto God and his fellow man, offering sacrifices in the Temple according to the Word of God for the masses of worshippers who had come to find peace and forgiveness at God's Altar. And because he labored in the Truth of God's Word, the people of God found strength, comfort and peace there.

And now, the fulfillment of God's promise to Zacharias and Elizabeth moved Zacharias to labor in his office with ever greater zeal, because he saw through the working of the Holy Spirit that the long awaited Messiah would soon appear in the flesh and minister personally to aching, hungry and thirsting souls.

He could see that the Promised One who would personally proclaim the Forgiveness of Sins to a sinful world and bring salvation to all those who were lost, would also lead the people into the way of peace. And so there was no end of real and personal joy for Zacharias, as with faith worked in him by the Holy Spirit, he gazed upon the Dayspring who had visited him from on high.

Many people desire peace. We find our minds hoping and dwelling upon thoughts of peace, especially at this time in our lives, when so much of the world seems to be enveloped in hopeless confusion and the terrible destruction of multiple wars. But the real peace you and I as Christians crave is a peace the world cannot give. It is a peace that surpasses all human understanding. It is a peace that rises above the brief existence this world and reaches into all eternity. It is the peace we have in the message of the season. It is the peace that we have with God for the sake of Christ Jesus. It is the peace that brings real joy and it is most certain *because the promises of God are true, He gives us strength to serve Him, and He guides us in the Way of Peace.*

Our joy at this Peace of God – especially at the beginning of this new church year – rises to untold heights because this is the peace God wants us to share, ***"to give light to those that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death..."***

Furthermore, we rejoice because as ambassadors of God and fellow laborers with Him, we want to make this new church year a year in which many others will be brought to the knowledge of the truth, fellow believers in God's promises and partakers of His peace – that *Peace of God* that is so dear to us.

May the coming new year find you on the path of peace in Christ Jesus. Amen.

+++++++

And now may that Peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen