

Sunday December 31, 2023  
Lesson 5: From Silence to Praise  
Scripture: Luke 1: 67-80

**Context:**

We continue our new winter curriculum, “God Abides,” focusing on how the Holy Spirit reminds us of God’s constant presence with humanity. The first unit is titled “Transforming Spirit,” with lessons on the gospel of Luke in the story of Jesus’ birth tying into the season of Advent and Christmas. Today’s purpose is to find out how the Holy Spirit brings repentance and peace through us.

On this first Sunday of Christmas, we circle around to our first lesson which focused on the story of Zechariah and the child promised unto him and his wife Elizabeth. This child would be John the Baptist, the messenger to herald the coming of his cousin Jesus. The lesson today recounts what happens after Zechariah has been silenced for not believing this event would happen and he can finally tell his story and he begins to prophesy about the events which have just taken place and will come.

One might ask so much attention is placed on John the Baptist, especially in the gospel of Luke. At the time of Luke’s writing, John the Baptist was extremely popular and when people put him next to Jesus, there were very many similarities as John was strikingly strong and attractive as a man of God.<sup>1</sup> Instead of discrediting or attacking John’s popularity though, Luke sought to tell the narrative to illuminate how the story unfolded. Luke chooses to show the roles of John and Jesus and their relationship not only in their ministries but also in prenatal and natal signs, speeches, and songs.<sup>2</sup> John already knows of his cousin’s significant birth as found in Luke 1:41 as he kicks for joy in the womb when Mary shares the news of being chosen as the mother of God. John is already stepping into his role as the messenger of his cousin.

The passage today emphasizes how Elizabeth and Zechariah also realize what is taking place and they celebrate with passion about Jesus’ coming and the role of their son in this message of good news. The account of John’s birth is 23 verses, from 57-80, and consists of three parts: the birth, the circumcision, and the naming of John; the inspired prophecy of Zechariah; and a brief statement about John which serves as both summary and transition to his public life.<sup>3</sup> The passage today, verses 67-80, called the Benedictus after the first word in the Latin translation, falls into two parts: verses 68-75 and 76-79.<sup>4</sup> The first part describes the role of Jesus as Messiah and what he will do for the people and the world. The second part describes the role of John the Baptist and how he will prepare the way for Jesus. For the early church, these accounts would allow for them to explain to others the differences between Jesus and John the

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<sup>1</sup>Craddock, Fred B. “Luke.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Baptist.<sup>5</sup> Zechariah's prophecy would have been a teaching piece for the church and would have been an easy way to help people connect all the dots.

### **Application**

The scene of Jesus' baptism is not mentioned here and yet it looms in the background as Luke and the other gospels will tell the narrative of Jesus being baptized by his cousin John in the Jordan River. The accounts usually include a dove coming from the heavens with a message from God to bless the baptism and proclaim favor upon Jesus and his mission. Even though Jesus did not need any saving from sin, his receiving of this means of grace was powerful to testify to what God would do in someone's life. As a result, a common symbol of the Holy Spirit in the Christian tradition is the dove, recalling the moment Jesus was washed in the waters and others were invited to follow. Yet the dove also represents peace as found in other scriptures and in Jewish tradition. Altogether, the dove represents the Holy Spirit, peace, repentance, and new life. For the Christian faith, this is a gift as it gives us an understanding of the Christian life and how grace works in our lives.

At an initial glance, peace and repentance together may not sound like a typical combination. Images of peace conjure up folks holding hands, or the tranquility of a landscape which gives our hearts a leap of joy or assurance. Images of repentance though usually carry tears or perhaps if we read the Psalms, a broken heart. Repentance means to turn from something and there is the connotation of how a wrong has been committed.

Yet Zechariah's words today give a broad picture of how these two different words come together. John's mission will be to preach to the people of how their sins can be forgiven and how repentance will come unto them. It will come from the Lord, who comes in light to give truth and to lead people on the path to peace. Repentance means acknowledging there is a need for restoration and for the pain to be healed by something. And as a result of pain being healed, there is peace, and all can live in harmony together.

I have come to find at the root of every conflict there is usually either the perception or the actual case of a wrongdoing. Sometimes, it is clearer than others for what caused a reaction from someone. When someone says something hurtful, we can name how the statement made us feel. And on the other hand, it is easy for us all to say things we later regret. True peace comes when all parties are able to sit down and name the conflict, whether we are the offender or the recipient.

Other times, it might be harder to name what is going on, whether anxiety or past experiences color things we see. In the world we live in today of constant communication, it is much easier to misunderstand and misconstrue the intentions and behaviors of others. Yet true peace never really comes unless we repent, naming perhaps where others had their shortcoming, or lo and behold, we had on our blinders on, and we missed something as well.

For Christians, repentance goes hand in hand with the grace we have in our Lord. There is nothing we can do or say to earn God's favor or protection. All of us are sinners, who even as we try, will still fall short of the glory of the Lord. Not even the perfectionists among us can get away as even "being perfect" can cause spiritual stumbling. Timelessly, Jesus stands there, giving us forgiveness and by his grace makes us clean again and again.

Yet in this gift of repentance, he invites us to seek peace both with ourselves and with one another. John came to tell those in search of a Savior of the one who would not only baptize

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 33.

them with water, as Jesus would also give the Holy Spirit to help us see things anew, to turn from our old habits and hang-ups, and to seek a life of peace with God and with one another.

Perhaps some of the most powerful experiences I've had in my life and in my ministry are when people are nudged to repent and seek ways to live peacefully with others. All of us can hide behind different things: defense mechanisms, self-righteousness, pride in our knowledge of the world and all situations. If honest though, we can name how those places are lonely and how we truly live when we can admit we were wrong and the need we have for God's grace in our life. When we realize we don't have it all together, we do not know everything, we have hurt our friend or our neighbor, then we understand our need for repentance. And the beauty is as we come to God, God already knows. There is grace and there is peace.

There is also an invitation. Will we seek God's peace within ourselves and with one another? One of the most cherished gifts I have received this Advent is from a colleague from Vanderbilt Divinity school serving in Tennessee. In mailing an Advent devotion to me, they included a star with the word "Mercy," and the lovely message of how their prayer for me in 2024 was for me to feel the mercy God has for me and to embrace it. What a way for me to start the new year and to remember how much the Lord loves and the peace he brings to my life.

How have you experienced repentance in your life? What is an example of peace coming to you after an act of repentance? How have you felt God's mercy at work in your life? Why do you think John's mission was so important and part of God's plan? How will you seek God's peace with yourself and with others in the coming year?

Rev. Dr. E. Hunter Pugh  
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge  
PO Box 71  
Brantley, AL 36009