

Luke 1:5-25
(Malachi 4:5-6; 2 Peter 3:8-13)
“Do Not Be Afraid for Your Prayer Has Been Heard”

Introduction

There is a tragically wrong impression about the gospel held by many folk: the idea that you must get your self together, get your life in shape, become respectable, self-confident and self-assured, before you can expect God to bless you. In other words, God will bless those whom it makes sense to bless, who – if I may put it this way – deserve to be blessed by God. If you would be God’s friend, well, shape up and make him proud of you, and you’ll stand a much better chance of enjoying God’s blessings.

In other words, we think that God is like us: that he acts according to human reasoning, aligning himself with those this world considers the winners and shunning those whom the world considers a bad investment. Yet how profoundly different God is, according to the Scriptures, showing up to rescue the desperate – not while we frenetically try to serve him, but rather when we stop and simply seek him – doing his work through the most unlikely people in the most unlikely ways.

And this is good news, because none of us is naturally capable of advancing God’s kingdom or of bringing his good news of salvation. All alike are in desperate need of his grace and helpless apart from his power. Only when we finally recognize this and cry out to him to rescue us do we begin to see him work in extraordinary ways in our very ordinary lives.

Our text serves as a confirmation and illustration of this wonderfully counter-intuitive way that God brings salvation to his people and prepares his people to receive that salvation.

Body

1. God usually shows up only after his people have given up (1:5-7).

Think of the political situation of these people gathered together at the Temple: the glory of their nation seems a thing of the distant past. They are an oppressed, powerless people, under the thumb of the mightiest power the world had ever seen. Their only hope would seem to be in conforming to Rome’s view of things: worship the Roman gods, and cultivate Roman tastes. Forget the God of Israel. Where was his power to be seen except in ancient stories?

And think of the personal situation of this priest and his wife: they were simply an old, childless couple who had lived lives of careful, intentional

obedience, whose best days now seemed to be behind them. Whatever hopes they once had of living lives of significance, lives that would impact the history of their people, were long gone. There was nothing that they could do but try to live out their final years with dignity and not give way to bitterness toward God for having refused to give them the children that in their culture were considered the supreme mark of God's favor upon a marriage.

Yet it is to this couple who have given up their dreams of being parents that God will send his long promised and eagerly awaited forerunner to the Messiah, the one who will prepare the way of the Lord. And it is to captive Israel that he will send his Messiah.

2. God usually shows up only when his people are together for prayer (1:8-10).

Truly, God can meet us anywhere and sometimes it is far from the crowd, in retreat, seeking his face in the presence only of the great company of angels and archangels, with the glory of creation all around and the heavens opened, and Christ smiling upon us.

But how much more often the Bible depicts the Lord meeting his people at that appointed place of worship. As Jesus would later promise to be especially present wherever two or three gather in his name, so throughout the Scriptures we see God come in power and might in response to the worship of his people. How many of you here have known what I discovered when, after years away from church and public worship, having cried out to God and wondered why the heavens were silent in response, I finally returned to the house of the Lord and found him waiting for me there, waiting for me to humble myself and kneel in the midst of his people as one more penitent, one more prodigal finally coming to my senses and saying, "I will arise and go to my Father's house." Here is where he always awaits those who seek him in spirit and in truth.

3. God usually accomplishes his most extraordinary work through the most ordinary people (1:11-25).

God takes this old man and woman, and promises to bring life and blessing to his people through them. Their child is to be consecrated to the Lord: that is, set apart for the Lord's work. That is what these families have sought to do here this morning, as they have brought their children to consecrate them to the Lord in baptism and have promised to raise them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

If you and I would know God's blessing on us and our household, and would be used of him to transform our part of the world entrusted to us, then we must ask ourselves what life and life-style changes may be required in order

for us to be the people of God, a people set apart for his honor and glory. Are you and I ready to surrender our fondest hopes and dreams in order to be used by God to fulfill his purposes in history?

4. God usually prepares us for his most extraordinary work in the most ordinary way (1:16-17).

What could be more ordinary than this: to turn the hearts of fathers to their children and to turn the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous. Who would not acknowledge the need of this: the fatherless need fathers, and the foolish and disobedient need to follow the path of wisdom? This is so simple, such ordinary wisdom, a clear and compelling message that anyone can get his mind around. We make it so hard, so very complicated. But there is a beautiful symmetry and simplicity to the ways of God. In fact, they feel right, because they are the things for which we were made.

Life feels wrong, things are painful and begin to break apart when parents neglect children and the children pursue things that lead to death instead of life. We prepare the way for the Lord in our lives and those of our children, as well as in the culture around us, when we return to the care and nurture of our children, and call others – especially fathers – to return to their families, to their children, and to give them the love, the time and attention they need; and when we pursue the ways of wisdom, the path that leads to life and joy and peace. It is also a call to be the family of God, a call to deep and faithful friendship, to self-sacrificial, accountable relationships

Conclusion

What would better prepare the way for Christ to live in us and through us, than to turn in love to those whom he has entrusted to us, to put off the works of darkness and put on the garments of grace, walking in the ways of wisdom that lead to life? Does this seem impossible to you? Are you at your wit's end this morning, thinking that God has forgotten you, that your situation is too far gone for even God to renew your life and give you a fresh start? Hear the good news of the gospel: God loves to show up when we are just about to give up, and he loves to make all things new. He's been doing it for ordinary people like you and me all throughout human history, and he'll do it for you.

God has promised, "You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you" (Jeremiah 29:13). In this Advent season he calls us once again "to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (1:17). Will you ask him this morning to begin preparing you for your part in his great story of salvation?