



God of all creation, again this year we anticipate your Holy Presence among us in the Bethlehem manger. We also find you in our neighbor next door, the homeless family in the park, the clerk at the convenience store, frontline medical and municipal workers, scientists studying COVID, and conflicts across the world, may we bring to all of these the joy of the Bethlehem baby. We pray in the name of the Bringer of [mercy] hope and Author of peace. Amen! © Leah Chang, 2006, 2021

Leah, who some of you may know, offers to any who'd like it, her weekly on-line notes on Sunday's texts. This week her opening prayer stood out and became my Pastor's prayer – offered as our Prayer of the Day. Extrapolating from it, we hear these reminders: We anticipate this year God will arrive among us in the Bethlehem manger, and in our neighbor next door, in the homeless family in the park, in the clerk at the convenience store, in frontline medical and municipal workers, in scientists studying COVID, and in conflicts familial and global.

I ended today's Prayer, "in the name of the Bringer of mercy and Author of peace." The words "mercy" and "peace" are big in today's reading of Luke 1. *By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high is breaking upon us, giving light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, guiding our feet into the way of peace.*

The need for mercy and peace never grows old. We can live without luxuries, but how do we carry on without mercy and peace? What better prayer than to ask God's tender mercy to dawn upon us, guiding us into ways of peace!

This is the Song of Zechariah, or the Benedictus – naming one of the Bible's awesome promises. *By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high has broken upon us, has been breaking upon us, will break upon us.* The verb can mean past, present, and continuing.

The Benedictus is often set aside to give time instead to the Magnificat, the Visitation, the birth stories. There's just so much in Luke 1 – being a long chapter, the longest in all the gospels. It's also long on beauty – considered by some one of the most beautiful pieces of literature out there. Luke 1 begins with a dedication to "O most excellent Theophilus." Theophilus means God-lover – could mean a particular friend of Jesus, but just as likely mean all who love God.

After the dedication, Luke 1 announces the birth of John – born to parents too old to expect such a surprise. Zechariah is the first to hear the intruding angel: “Your wife is going to bear a child.” Like Abraham, Zechariah doesn’t believe such craziness. Abraham laughed. Zechariah argues, “How will I know this is true?” And argues on, “I’m old! My wife is old!”

The angel isn’t dissuaded. “**I** am Gabriel. **I** stand in the presence of God. **I** have been sent to bring you this good news. But because **you** don’t believe me, you will be mute, unable to speak until it happens.” And so it was. The house went quiet. And Elizabeth conceives.

Then Gabriel goes to Mary who isn’t old like her cousin but is as unexpected. But the interrupting angel interrupts again. “It’s a God-thing,” Gabriel assures. Mary wanted to be a part of God’s promises and says, “Here I am, let it be to me as you say.” Mary’s willingness may well have resulted from already having a relationship with God – nurtured as a part of the house of David. Spirit was called Shekinah. Mary grew up expecting in-breakings of Shekinah. “Let it be,” she says. Are we expecting in-breakings of the Spirit? Are our hearts open wide in trust?

The angel doesn’t hang out long, but things are set in motion as the story moves on with Mary making haste to visit Elizabeth. Gabriel thankfully had told Mary her cousin was also expecting. No phones or email would have told her, so Gabriel was kind to share the news. Luke 1 then gives us the heartwarming story of their visit. The Visitation is appointed to be read Dec. 19th – one among many reasons to join in worship the 4th Sunday of Advent.

After The Visitation, Luke 1 gives us Mary’s song, the Magnificat, celebrating God coming to the lowly. Then, to end this first chapter, we’re told of John’s birth, and Zechariah again able to speak. His first words after nine months of silence are to do as the angel instructed, name the baby John. Zechariah’s song finally ends this long, lovely chapter – celebrating God’s promises.

Perhaps the most unexpected discovery in my doctoral work on Luther’s spirituality was finding this one sentence admission of Luther, “If it weren’t for the promise, I wouldn’t pray.” Luther clung to the promise that God would be with us. That’s what got him through his storms. That’s what gave him courage to not despair, even in the face of the death of a beloved daughter, even in the face of threat, even when challenging those with power. The promises of God led Luther to pray. Prayer shaped his life, convinced as he was, God was with him, and for him, and for us.

The Benedictus, celebrates this promise-making and promise-keeping of God – the promise of tender mercies new every morning; the possibility that we can learn the ways of peace. Mercy and peace are nothing short of signs that God is with us. Hear this promise as also for you!

God’s tender mercy will meet you and teach you the way of peace this day, this difficult week, this trying time, through that seemingly impossible impasse, amid your unsettled questions. In today’s Hymn of the Day we’ll be asking God to show us this lovely grace. ELW 259 vs 4.

*“Come, Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ; our hearts are open wide in trust.
Oh, show us now your lovely grace, upon our sorrows shine your face,
and let your Holy Spirit guide our journey in your grace so wide...”*

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