BECAUSE OF THE TENDER MERCY OF OUR GOD

Luke 1:57-80

because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

—Luke 1:78

Good morning. In my message I’d like to share about the mercy of God that saves his people. I have found that it is oftentimes awkward to speak to people about mercy. We may be suspicious about its effectiveness in our time of need and conflict with others because we don’t know how others would respond to our mercy. But have you thought about how many times a day you ask God for his mercy? We sure love to ask and receive mercy. But God revealed in today’s passage his mercy that saves his people.

I’d like to look at the passage in three sections:

1. The birth of the baby John and his naming.

2. Zechariah’s praise to God for Jesus

3. Zechariah’s prophecy about his baby John.

In each section, it mentions that God has redeemed and saved them according to his mercy. Because of his great mercy he had come and redeemed his people. I think that it is good for us today to think about his mercy to save because it shows how he wants us to know him, glorify him, and serve him.

1. The birth of the baby John and his naming.

Look again at verses 57-58.

[57] When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. [58] Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

Notice that it says that having the baby was the Lord showing “great mercy.” It was received as God’s great mercy. There was joy for them and all their relatives and neighbors. But why call it “mercy”? This tells us that they had felt undeserving. It was a special act of kindness from God. They were a faithful priestly family. They prayed even into their old age for a baby. But they didn’t find themselves as deserving. Otherwise, they would not have said that God was showing “great mercy” to them. Instead, they might have said, “Finally!” with an air of entitlement.

Elizabeth had been especially happy. She received the baby as God’s favor to remove her disgrace (25). She was now old, but she had felt like she was carrying a burden of disgrace because she wasn’t able to have any children. Some women don’t have children because they don’t want to. Others want to, like Elizabeth, want to but are not able to. One of my relatives is also an old woman who is physically unable to have children. She feels like she is cursed for the bad things she has done and is disgraced. Elizabeth’s story reminded me of her. I pray for her to have a child in her old age too. So when I think about my relative, I can imagine a little bit the joy Elizabeth and her relatives and neighbors may have shared that day. God had remembered this old couple and given them a baby.

Can you imagine what joy the news of a baby brought to them? What was that day like for her, to first receive the news? The angel had visited her husband, not her, and had given the news. It looked like he almost blew it by his words of unbelief! When she got the full story, she could have been upset with him. “Why did we pray all of these years and then you talk like that to an angel of God?” Then she had to bear his being mute for nine months. If she had a question, she would ask, “Honey, what do you think about this?” But he couldn’t answer. Maybe it was a blessing to have him be quiet and just listen to her say whatever she wanted. Anyway, despite Zechariah’s words of unbelief, she gave birth to a baby at the right time. God still gave them a baby. He didn’t take it away. So that day when she gave birth, it was really God’s great mercy to them. He gave them the baby despite Zechariah’s unbelieving words.

Then came the time to name the baby. Here’s where we see what his mercy further produced in Elizabeth and Zechariah.

Look again at verses 59-66.

[59] On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, [60] but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.” [61] They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”

[62] Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. [63] He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” [64] Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. [65] All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. [66] Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

We see in these verses that God’s mercy produced faith in them. They showed their faith by insisting on naming the baby John, just as God had instructed them to do. Elizabeth was the first to speak up. Then after they tried to bypass her, Zechariah confirmed the name with his writing tablet.

During those nine to ten months of pregnancy, something was moved in Elizabeth and Zechariah. He had been unsure that God could do it for them. But in that time his faith grew. Maybe as her belly got bigger and bigger, so his faith got bigger and bigger. Finally when the baby came out, it was like his faith was really sure. It says that after he wrote, “His name is John,” that "Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God” (64). Then everyone accepted the name and they wondered what that child was going to be for clearly God was working among them.

So, we see that his great mercy produced faith in them. The name John showed that they believed God was going to do for the people all that he had said through the angel. John’s work was to prepare people for the coming of the Lord to rescue his people.

This is in reference to the king, the Savior as God promised. He speaks about this in the next section in more detail. But in receiving God’s mercy, their own hearts and eyes were opened to God’s mercy not just to them, but to all of their people. They thought that they had bore disgrace by being old and childless. But as a people, they also bore this kind of disgrace. We recently finished going through 1 and 2 Samuel. I think it was God’s good preparation for entering into Luke’s gospel. We saw how God raised up David and established his kingdom. There was no one like David and his mighty men. Their enemies had been defeated. They built a temple to worship God. But they sinned against God. Their kingdom was dissolved by foreign nations, and their land was destroyed. The temple and their houses were all burned down and the walls of the city destroyed. They had lost all of their honor, power, and standing as a kingdom and as a people of God. They had to bear that disgrace and turn back to God for a long time. Even in Zechariah’s day, David’s house did not have a king on the throne. The announcement and birth of John revealed God’s mercy and power to save his people and remove their disgrace.

If you think about it, it is not easy for a person to have their disgrace removed. How many disgraced world leaders recover from their disgrace? Not many. God had not just remembered an old, disgraced couple, but he had remembered his people. John’s birth was the beginning of his mercy being shown to all his people in order to save them. Zechariah and Elizabeth experienced his mercy personally and they were opened to his mercy for all the people. They could see beyond their own situation to God’s greater salvation work. Zechariah praised God for this.

2. Zechariah’s praise to God for Jesus

Look at Zechariah’s praise in verses 67-75.

[67] His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

[68] “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,

    because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

[69] He has raised up a horn of salvation for us

    in the house of his servant David

[70] (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

[71] salvation from our enemies

    and from the hand of all who hate us—

[72] to show mercy to our ancestors

    and to remember his holy covenant,

[73] the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

[74] to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,

    and to enable us to serve him without fear

[75] in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

First, we see that he was filled with the Holy Spirit. He was speaking words inspired by the Holy Spirit. When he put his faith in God, suddenly God gave him a lot to say!

Second, he is speaking here about a king. It says,

[68] Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,

    because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

[69] He has raised up a horn of salvation for us

    in the house of his servant David

[70] (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

The mention of the house of David refers to a king. Through the king the people would be safe from their enemies and enabled to serve God.

God had revealed this purpose to David. He promised to establish one of David’s sons on God’s throne forever. He would give rest from their enemies on all sides and he would build God’s house. Looking back to 1 and 2 Samuel we see that David performed two functions primarily as the king: he defeated all of their enemies and prepared the building of the temple, the house of God, for the people to worship and serve God. That was the king’s job.

When all the enemies, such as the Philistines and Edomites and Ammonites were defeated and subjugated under David, the people were at peace. This peace enabled them to serve God without fear. There was nothing to be afraid of anymore. There was no more oppression from enemies.

God gave David this word regarding the building of the temple in 1 Chronicles 22:9-10,

[9] But you will have a son who will be a man of peace and rest, and I will give him rest from all his enemies on every side. His name will be Solomon, and I will grant Israel peace and quiet during his reign. [10] He is the one who will build a house for my Name. He will be my son, and I will be his father. And I will establish the throne of his kingdom over Israel forever.’

When God gave them salvation from their enemies it was for them to serve him without fear by building the house of God. They were free to do so without the fear of their enemies getting in the way and oppressing them.

But Solomon turned away from God. He didn't keep the conditions that God set forth to establish his kingdom. Solomon did not fulfill this promise. By his own admission, he knew that the temple he built would not be a true house for God to dwell in with his people, but just a place to burn incense. He had also turned away from God later in his life. That kingdom was dissolved and that temple was burned to the ground.

In Zechariah’s day, they had a temple. He served God by his priestly duty at the appointed times. But it was short of God’s purpose for them. Still, he spoke of enemies and those who hate them oppressing them. It was evident because the forgiveness of sins was not yet made for them. We can hear the joy and relief in his words. Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel because he has come to his people and redeemed them!

The horn of salvation from the house of David was referring to Jesus, who was still in Mary’s womb! Where Solomon and his sons failed, Jesus would fulfill the purpose of the king to rescue his people and enable them to serve God. Interestingly, he spoke about these things in the past tense. “he has come to his people and redeemed them.” “He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.” We have to keep in mind that Jesus has not yet been born. He is still in Mary’s womb. He doesn’t speak with the clarity of knowing Jesus’ ministry as we do, of his death on the cross and his resurrection. But by the Holy Spirit’s inspiration and his faith, he spoke about Jesus as the king who has come and redeemed his people. Jesus is the king who had come to save his people and restore them as God’s people in God’s kingdom. As the king, Jesus would save them from all their enemies and enable them to serve God without fear. It was as good as done.

Look again at verses 71-75.

[71] salvation from our enemies

    and from the hand of all who hate us—

[72] to show mercy to our ancestors

    and to remember his holy covenant,

[73] the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

[74] to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,

    and to enable us to serve him without fear

[75] in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

He will save them from their enemies and enable them to serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. The words “holiness and righteousness” tell us what enemies the king will rescue his people from and how. The enemies referenced were not the Philistines, Ammonites, the Greeks or the Romans. But it is sin and death. To make the people holy and righteous they needs to be forgiveness of sins. It speaks ahead to Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection whereby he provided forgiveness of sins, defeated the devil, and overcame death. He makes his people holy and righteous before God all their days. Jesus’ blood that saves you does not have an expiration date. Jesus isn’t crucified many times, but he was crucified only once. God is holy and righteous. A sinful people cannot stand before him and serve him. But by Jesus people are made new, holy and righteous. He becomes the righteousness and holiness for his people (1 Corinthians 1:30). His rescue from the enemies of sin and the corrupted nature is good.

He says that it is “to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant.” God raised up Jesus to show mercy to them. He emphasized that this was done to show mercy to his people.

The oath was given to Abraham. David’s house, David was born almost 800 years after Abraham, was the instrument to fulfill that oath. It was a long time in the making, from Abraham to Jesus. Throughout that long history, the people had shown themselves as extremely undeserving. They became just like the surrounding nations and didn’t show anything different as a people of God. They worshiped their idols and were unjust and ungodly to each other. But still God kept his covenant and oath to send a king to save them from their enemies and enable them to serve God.

The image Zechariah gives here is that God has come as the king to provide a safe place of righteousness and holiness for his people to serve him, according to his mercy. It’s a different kind of kingdom. Now we have the full benefit of what Zechariah prophesied. This passage helps us to appreciate and see the mercy of God that rescues and enables us to serve him. Do you serve God because you’re righteous? Are you righteous because of your extensive training? There may be some value, but it is only possible through Jesus who rescued you from all the enemies and makes you holy and righteous. We are enabled to serve God because of his mercy through Jesus. The word “enable” means that you couldn’t do it before. The person still in their sin is a slave to sin. He will serve his corrupted nature. But Jesus rescues a person to set them free to serve God. He gives his holiness and righteousness to the rescued person. It is God’s mercy that we can serve. Jesus accomplished his rescue of his people on the cross. He died and rose from the dead to defeat our enemies, to save his people, and to make a safe place for them and to enable them to serve God. Our fight is a fight of faith (1 Timothy 6:12, 2 Timothy 4:7). Thanks be to God for his mercy to rescue his people and to make them holy and righteous to enable them to serve him!

3. Zechariah’s prophecy about his baby John.

Look again at verses 76-79.

[76] And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;

    for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

[77] to give his people the knowledge of salvation

    through the forgiveness of their sins,

[78] because of the tender mercy of our God,

    by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

[79] to shine on those living in darkness

    and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

John’s role was to prepare the way for the Lord by giving people the knowledge of salvation. He says again that it is salvation through the forgiveness of sins. Not salvation against Rome or other countries as enemies. They are not the enemies. But Jesus saves us from our sins. He came and brought forgiveness.

Here, Zechariah also says that this is because of God’s mercy.

Look again at verse 78.

because of the tender mercy of our God,

    by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

The word “tender” means kind, compassionate, soft. His mercy is tender and like a light shining on the world. This light guides in the path of peace. God’s mercy produced preparation and readiness by empowering them with the knowledge of salvation. John wasn’t prepared through harshness and like going through a gym. He was prepared in a house of mercy. The way before the Lord was prepared in a house of mercy.

Look at verse 80.

And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

God was raising up John according to his purpose to prepare the way before the Lord. This tells us God’s faithfulness in his mercy to his people, and the devotion and preparation of Zechariah’s family. As they had prayed for many years for son, Zechariah probably had the expectation of his son serving in the priestly duties, just he had done. The priestly duties were organized by family. Not just anyone could apply for the work. But they didn’t hold John for themselves. They devoted him according to God’s mercy and purpose. God’s Spirit was with him and strengthening him for the work he had in mind.

Today’s passage spoke to me about God’s mercy so that his people can serve him and be in a safe place. In the first place, Jesus is the fighter and savior from the enemies. It’s not us. Secondly, he secured a safe, holy and righteous place for his people. So our place ought to be a safe place for God’s mercy to flow into people’s live so that they can serve him. Like Zechariah, we should see the salvation and redemption Jesus has already won for us. By faith we look to what he has already done for us, how he has already empowered us and made a safe place for us to serve him to build each other up.

I think we ought to give more attention to building each other up and strengthening our families. Especially, we ought to be merciful to each other, just as God has been merciful to us, with great and tender mercy.

I have found that it’s not easy to show mercy. You might be afraid or weary of showing mercy at times. For example, you might think, “If I show mercy, then that person will just keep doing wrong.” Or, “If I show mercy, they will take advantage of me.” Or, “If I show mercy, mercy will become cheap and likely to be abused.” And so on. The basic thing is that we might be afraid that mercy will not help people. But we can challenge those fears: Does mercy really bring complacency, laziness and sin? God has shown himself to be greatly and tenderly merciful. Because of his mercy he worked his salvation to redeem his people. We can see what his mercy produced in this passage: faith, salvation, and empowerment (readiness). Zechariah went from unbelieving words to sure words of finished salvation of Jesus Christ. In mercy there is a safe place for God’s people. Out of his mercy, his people are enabled to serve him.

Some people want a challenge. And they want to challenge others. For example, giving a hard message of repentance or putting forth some really challenging goal in the ministry. I do not take way from that. But this passage showed me that it was through his mercy that God enabled people to serve him. And it occurred to me that here is a challenge then for you: be merciful as God is merciful. Show mercy to others expecting great things from God, that through showing his mercy others will be enabled to serve him. I think it is a great challenge because it relies fully on God to help the other person. By showing mercy, we practically forgive, we give to others although they don’t deserve it, care for them and protect others without pushing or training, and treat them as better than ourselves by humbly serving. See if God doesn’t work in them and enable them to serve him more than you can imagine! Training can be endless! But how about mercy? Is your mercy great and tender like God’s? Being merciful will not make us lose our action and faith and discipline. But we see that from God’s mercy came faith, salvation and action.

Thanks be to God for showing us great mercy through Jesus Christ. In the passage we see how his mercy produced faith, salvation and empowerment for his people. May God help us to do the same and serve him, practicing his mercy to each other.