

To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ: mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you, Amen.

⁶⁷ Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying: ⁶⁸ 'Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people, ⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, ⁷⁰ as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, who have been since the world began, ⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, ⁷² to perform the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath which He swore to our father Abraham: ⁷⁴ To grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life. ⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, ⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins, ⁷⁸ through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; ⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

Text: Luke 1:67-79 A 12/4/16 Deuteronomy 18:15-22 2 Timothy 3:10-17 Psalm
Hymns: 63, 645, 94, 709

PRAISE GOD FOR HIS GIFTS TO US!

- 1. The gift of our Savior**
- 2. The gift of God's saving Word**
- 3. The gift of new life in Jesus**

Dear fellow believers in the Christchild,

Leo Buscaglia, a popular public speaker, was talking about Christmas memories. He talked about one Christmas when he was a boy. He had been very bad. He was told, "If you're not good, Santa won't bring you any presents." He had always gotten Christmas presents in the past, so he figured he could continue being bad. Christmas Day came, his family gathered together to open presents, and guess what? He **really** didn't get anything! He cried and begged, but he still didn't get anything. His mother told him it was because he didn't deserve it. Today's text is about the opposite – gifts that are given in spite of the fact that they aren't deserved.

– 1 –

Our text is about Zacharias, who became the father of John the Baptist. God had promised to give Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth a son in their old age. Zacharias doubted it would happen, so God made him unable to speak until John was born. When John was born, the first words Zacharias spoke were words of praise to God for God's gift of John, and for God's greatest gift of all: Jesus.

Darkness can be frightening. Darkness can cause us to lose our way. Zacharias says that we “*sit in darkness and the shadow of death.*” Those words paint a bleak picture of our natural spiritual condition: no true hope and a certain future of physical and eternal death. John says that by nature “*men loved darkness rather than light*” (Jn. 3:19). By nature we resist Jesus Christ and would rather remain in spiritual darkness.

But God had mercy on us. Zacharias praises God that “*the Dayspring from on high has visited us.*” “*Dayspring*” is a poetic word for “sunrise,” the first light of dawn, signaling the end of night’s darkness and the beginning of a new day. “*Dayspring*” is capitalized in our text – a beautiful reference to Jesus who says of Himself, “*I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life*” (Jn. 8:12). Jesus comes into the darkness of our sin and death, and gives us His light of eternal life! The Old Testament believer Isaiah prophesied of the time Jesus was born: “*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined*” (Is. 9:2).

Zacharias says that Jesus, “*the Dayspring from on high has visited us.*” If you’ve ever been in the hospital or laid up at home, you know how much it means when someone comes to visit you. Zacharias says that Jesus, in His “*tender mercy,*” “*has visited us*” sin-sick people. “*Tender mercy*” in the original text carries with it the idea that Jesus comes to take care of us; that He not only feels pity for us but that He has also done what was needed to help us. When we visit someone who is sick or hurt mostly all we can do is express our love and sympathy. But Jesus, our “*Dayspring from on high ... has visited us*” and brought us out of sin’s darkness!

Zacharias says God “[*remembered*] *His holy covenant, the oath which He swore to our father Abraham.*” Zacharias’ words recall the promise God had made long before to Abraham: “*In your seed*” (in Abraham’s Descendant, Jesus) “*all the nations of the earth shall be blessed*” (Gen. 22:18). Jesus, the Christchild in the manger, descended from Abraham, comes to bring salvation to the whole world.

Zacharias praises Jesus who, he says, “*has ... redeemed His people.*” Jesus claims us sinners as “*His people.*” At the time Zacharias said that Jesus “*has ... redeemed His people*” Jesus hadn’t been born yet. But in God’s eyes the redemption Jesus would bring us was as good as done. Satan, sin, death, and hell held us in their power. But Jesus “*redeemed*” us. “*Redeem*” means “buy back.” Jesus paid the price of His life on the cross to buy us back from the power of Satan, sin, death and hell. We confess in Luther’s explanation to the 2nd Article of the Apostle’s Creed that Jesus “has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sin, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death.”

Zacharias praises God who *“has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David.”* In the Old Testament when it is said that God ‘raised up a person’s horn’ it meant that God had strengthened blessed that person. The picture came from the horns of a bull which he uses to attack and defend himself. The *“horn of salvation”* God *“raised up ... for us in the house of David”* is Jesus Christ, descended from David. Jesus, our *“horn of salvation,”* attacked Satan and defended us against him; dealing Satan the death blow as He cried out on the cross, *“It is finished!”* (Jn. 19:30).

– 2 –

Zacharias’ son, John the Baptist, had the special privilege of being the herald of Jesus, spreading the Good News of salvation which Jesus brings for all people. Zacharias happily exclaims about his son John, *“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins.”* We picture John the Baptist as the stern figure out in the wilderness preaching the law: *“Repent!”* John was also the beautiful Gospel preacher who pointed out Jesus and said, *“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* (Jn. 1:29). It was the Word of God John preached, Law and Gospel, that prepared the hearts of the people to receive the Messiah.

Zacharias speaks of *“the remission of [our] sins.”* *“Remission”* in the original is literally letting go, sending away, leaving behind. The Lord assures us in His Word, *“I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins”* (Is. 43:25). The poor people troubled by their sins in the day John the Baptist lived were told by their spiritual leaders that they had to earn salvation by their own goodness. God sent John to assure the people that in Jesus there is forgiveness for every sin of every sinner.

When we tell Jesus we’re sorry for our sins, He forgives us. Jesus lets our sins go: forgives and truly forgets our sins, Jesus sends our sins away from Him and from us, and Jesus leaves our sins behind Him and us. The Prophet Micah marveled, *“Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy. He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea”* (Mic. 7:18-19). The message of repentance and forgiveness John the Baptist preached prepared the people to receive Jesus back then. That same Law and Gospel message prepares us to receive the Christchild in believing hearts now.

– 3 –

When I was a boy, one time another boy tried to beat me up. But my big brother wouldn’t let him. Zacharias says that Jesus comes to *“[save us] from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.”* The enemies Zacharias is thinking of are far deadlier than any earthly enemy. The

Apostle Paul knew about those enemies: *“We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places”* (Eph. 6:12). Earlier Zacharias had spoken of us *“[sitting] in darkness and the shadow of death.”* Our greatest enemies are our spiritual enemies: Satan, who hates us and wants to take us away from God, sin, which infects everything we think and say and do, and death, physical death and eternal death in hell. Zacharias says that Jesus comes to *“[save us] from our enemies;”* which He did with His perfect life, innocent death, and bodily resurrection from the dead.

Zacharias says Jesus has done all this for us *“that we ... might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.”* We don’t have to be afraid of God because of our sins. God has forgiven us and saved us and given us a whole new life in Jesus. The Bible says, *“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new”* (2 Cor. 5:17). Because of what Jesus has done for us we serve God willingly and without fear.

If it really were true that only those who are good enough get Christmas presents, a lot of people would be disappointed when Christmas comes. Even though we are sinners and don’t deserve it, God has given us the greatest gifts of all: the gift of our Savior, the gift of His saving Word, and the gift of new life in Jesus. **PRAISE GOD FOR HIS GIFTS TO US!** Amen.