

# A Sermon for DaySpring

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## “When a Dream Comes True”

*The Second in an Advent Series*

**Luke 21: 1: 68-75**

**December 7, 2003**

Do you realize how much we Central Texans lie to ourselves at Christmas time. We're as likely to be turning on the AC as the Heat on December 25<sup>th</sup> and yet we'll be singing songs that describe a more Northern, Currier and Ives version of Christmas.

I've never once, roasted a **“chestnut on an open fire.”**

Never heard **“sleigh bells ring”** while I walked through a Winter Wonderland.

Never been to a birthday party at “Farmer Grays” to end a “perfect day.”

And the Christmases I used to know, weren't anywhere near white.

And yet I'll listen to... hum along with... sing these Christmas songs over and over as if they are a part of my experience. And you will too.

Are we lying to ourselves? Well, not really. We're just singing about a vision of something that is perfect... something we long for... something that is true even though we've not known it completely true in our lives.

Snow and snowmen.

Warm fires and warm friends gathered around them.

Certain smells and tastes and sounds.

Carolers standing on doorsteps and folks walking on foot to the old church for services while the bells ring. I know it's not considered great art by those who know, but I'm a sucker for Thomas Kinkade. And for those of you, who've read the novels, I could live in Mitford in a heartbeat... especially at Christmas.

That's in part why we sing these songs every year. We're busy fighting traffic at the mall and something in us would rather be taking a quiet sleigh ride through the snow with those we love to grandma's house.

We sing of what may be or what could be... or ought to be.

We sing of a Christmas that is true

and simple

and postcard perfect.

though we don't experience it that way... at least not totally.

The Gospel Text we heard earlier is one of the first Christmas carols. It's called the Benedictus because that's the Latin translation of first word in the song... **“blessed be the Lord.”**

The Benedictus is the name of the carol Zechariah sings at the circumcision of his son, John. These are the first words he utters after nine months, remember?

He was in the temple, he was burning incense at the altar. It was his big day as a priest. They worked in shifts and his shift was on duty. He drew the short straw and so it was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to burn incense in the most holy place. Most of the priests never got to do this.

So here he is...

It's the holy day...

It's the holy place...

You know he's in serious prayer and if you know his story at all, you can probably guess what he's praying. Elizabeth and Zechariah his wife were really good people, "**blameless**" is what Luke calls them. They are righteous but they are also childless and have been dealing with a lifetime of everything that meant in that culture.

Good people were blessed with children, according to the theology of the day. To be barren, childless, was a sure sign there were sinful skeletons in the closet. It wasn't just sad, it was disgraceful and, in fact, even grounds for divorce.

Luke lays out the unfortunate details, boom, boom, boom. They were good. They were barren. They were old. They had turned the nursery into a study a long time ago.

They'd prayed a lot... don't you think. They'd pray to God and asked for a child and you know that's what Zechariah was doing as he moved reverently through the temple. "**Maybe here, my prayer will be heard.**"

As a priest, certainly he was making intercession on behalf of the people but you know he also prayed for himself and his wife. "**God, I know she's old but please....**"

Luke implies that Zechariah was praying exactly that because the angel Gabriel appears to him and after getting past that standard angelic response, "**Fear not,**" the angel says, "**Your prayer has been heard and Elizabeth will have a son.**" "**Not only that,**" says Gabriel,

**"But you are to call him John.**

**He'll bring you amazing joy.**

**He's going to be great in God's sight...**

**a spirit-filled man... like Elijah.**

**And most of all, he'll prepare the people so that they can know the Lord."**

What an announcement! What a son!!! What a moment!!!!!!

But... even there in the temple, hearing it from an Angel, Zechariah had trouble swallowing it all, "**Ho...ww.... h...how, how can I know for sure?**" A reasonable question... in my way of thinking. He and Elizabeth both had AARP cards for years now.

But the angel didn't appreciate the question, seeing how he'd made a special appearance and a special announcement on such a special day... and so he told Zechariah that he wouldn't be able to speak until this happened.

Think of it as therapy rather than punishment. Silence is what an angel orders up when we have trouble with faith. I find that very interesting. If you have trouble believing, go shut your mouth for a long, long time and see what happens.

That was Zechariah's experience. For nine months, he couldn't talk. He's so excited. He's got a son on the way, for goodness sakes. And not just any son but one who's going to help his people to know God. There's so much to anticipate.

He's a father whose dream is coming true and a priest who's dream is coming true. But he can't talk about it.

Elizabeth conceives... she goes into seclusion... she grows... in her age probably taking things very easy... maybe she's in bed a lot. Zechariah helps as he can but there isn't much to do really.

Other than to wait... and think... study and read a lot, I suspect. Zechariah's connecting the prophetic dots and he begins to envision some mighty exciting things for his boy John.

The day comes... the labor begins... Elizabeth gives birth. Zechariah still can't talk and for eight days he's scared to death. He'd replayed the conversation a million times in his head. The angel said clearly, **“you will be unable to speak until the day this happens.”**

He'd assumed that this meant...

“until the child is born...”

what else could it have meant?

Apparently, “this” wasn't just about what God was doing but about what Zechariah was willing to do as well. It always is, by the way.

“This” is always about God's initiative and our obedience... our yes is always the second half of the equation. It wasn't until Zechariah named the child “John” as he was instructed to do that he could speak.

He wrote it on a clipboard... **“His... name... is... John....”** No sooner had he put the chalk down was he filled with the Holy Spirit (as all new fathers are) and that's when he sang this Christmas carol.

Zechariah borrows some lines from the Old Testament and belts one out. It's all about how good God is because God has remembered that promise of old and is sending a “horn” an instrument of salvation. Zechariah is singing about how they are going to be delivered from their enemies and from the hand of all those who hate them. **“God is going to rescue us and we won't have to be afraid anymore.”**

So... this first Christmas carol was a lot like the ones we sing, right?

Zechariah was singing about something true but not something that he would experience.

He was singing about deliverance from enemies... and singing about it as if it were a done deal.

Singing as if it wouldn't be long at all 'till he could see the Romans heading back to Rome for good. Singing like any day now, Israel was going to be safe for a change... and live in peace.

Zechariah sings of a vision of reality...

the ways things may be or can be or ought to be...

His song pictures a perfect salvation. Post card salvation.

A Thomas Kinkade, Norman Rockwell redemption.

God's in heaven, the Messiah's on earth, and all's right with the world. That's the carol Zechariah sings.

We could pick at this song couldn't we? Question its theology couldn't we. We might wonder if Zechariah had the wrong idea altogether about God's salvation... too political.

We might wonder about the deliverance he sings of... and what he really means and if he really believes God's coming into our lives automatically removes our enemies. Poof! Presto!

Someone might hear that line about the DaySpring shining on those who live in darkness and say, **"I'm still waiting on that one... I still feel like I'm in the dark... even though I believe in that DaySpring from on high."**

Someone else might say, **"We're about as likely to have peace this holiday season as we are a White Christmas in Central Texas."**

We could raise plenty of questions and honestly, I'll bet Zechariah could too. After he came down off cloud nine... a few weeks later. But he sings this song in a moment of joy as if it's all a done deal... as if it's reality. As if the dream has come true. And it has... but then it hasn't.

Lot's of songs are this way. Especially hymns. I heard someone (Alan Walworth) once say, **"Hymns lie just a bit... they lie just beyond what we experience."**

Is **"everyday with Jesus sweeter than the day before?"** Do I see new mercies, **"morning by morning?"** Every morning? Am I safe and secure, **"leaning on the everlasting arms?"** Is what I grew up singing on Sunday night true? Well, it is and it isn't. Does Christ, **"rule the world with truth and grace?"** That's the affirmation we make when we sing "Joy to the World." Is it true?

Well, not completely... Christ doesn't rule and have any control over many things... and only partial control of most things... your heart and my heart for starters. Most headlines in the paper tell us that we sing of what isn't so.

But still we sing, at Christmas we sing, and just like Zechariah, we sing of what is true. We declare... what can be and what ought to be. We declare what is already... in our lives and in the world at least some of the time. And what will be someday.

There are lots of ways to quibble with Zechariah's carol. And a million questions you can wrestle with about the incarnation itself... And there's time for that... but not in a moment like this one like Zechariah has. His child has been born and a dream has come true.

Christmas is a dreamy season... It's a season for saying that our dream has come true. It's a season for singing with great joy and singing about wonderful, large truths... and singing about a vision of what is and what will be because...

God has come to us in Christ to deliverer us from our enemies...

to shine on us in our darkness

and to guide our feet in the paths of peace.

Let yourself have a Zechariah Christmas why don't you. Just enter into the amazement of life for a while. Set your questions aside... give your cynical side a rest... let the mysterious have the upper hand for once. Enjoy this miracle. Celebrate it and sing of it from your heart.

A child has been born and this birth really can change everything for you ... it really is your salvation.