

The Promise Keeping God

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[0 : 0 0] The scripture reading today comes from Luke chapter 1 verses 57 to 80. Please follow along on your bulletin on the screen or in your own Bible. Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth and she bore a son and her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord has shown great mercy to her and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child and they would have called him Zechariah after his father but his mother answered no he shall be called John and they said to her none of your relatives is called by this name and they made signs to his father inquiring what he wanted him to be called and he asked for a writing tablet and wrote his name is John and they all wondered and immediately his mouth was open and his tongue loosed and he spoke blessing God and fear came on all their neighbors and all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea and all who heard them lay them up in their hearts saying what then will this child be for the hand of the

Lord was with him and his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied saying blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant the oath that he swore to our father Abraham to grant us that we being delivered from the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days and you child will be called the prophet of the most high for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins because of the tender mercy of our God whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death to guide our feet into the way of peace and the child grew and became strong in spirit and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel this is the word of God good morning everyone that was pretty good if you don't know me my name is Oscar can you hear me okay is it clear I'm one of the leaders here at watermark let me actually join me in praying for us as we receive God's word today father we humbly come before you we want to want our hearts to be ready to and be prepared to receive your word today God thank you for your word which is powerful and is alive and dynamic and works into the inner workings of our hearts we don't want to just come away from here with some interesting advice or some uplifting talk and just forget about it tomorrow God we want to be changed and transformed the liking of Jesus to to know him and love him more and to be like him help me God as I articulate this message today help me to speak clearly and I pray God that my heart would be just as in love with Christ as all of us as we receive your word today in Jesus name we pray amen sorry guys that okay Chris thanks for your help what does it mean to be a man or woman of your word do we really mean it when we make a promise we'll say hey let's have lunch tomorrow meet you at 12 o'clock 12 sharp but the next day 11 45 we rush out the door the MTR is late we miss the bus and we get there late we commit to go into a community group on Friday night but when something better comes around we we go to that we skip CG when we meet a friend that we haven't seen in a while we bump into them we'll say hey it's great to see you let's catch up I'll whatsapp you we meet up for lunch or coffee but then life gets busy we forget and we move on by the way I've done all these things myself many times what does it mean to keep a promise well today as we celebrate the last Sunday of this season of Advent we're going to look into this passage concerning the birth of John the Baptist the cousin of Jesus and inside this passage is this

beautiful song or prophecy by John's father Zechariah the song is often called the Benedictus which means blessed it means blessed in Latin after the first word of this song blessed be the Lord God of Israel similar to Mary's song from last week the Magnificat which means magnifies the Benedictus is a song of praise and blessing to God it's a song that exudes thanksgiving to God because God has indeed honored his promises to his people Israel because God isn't like us we struggle to keep our promises but the sovereign God of the Bible always has always and always will keep his promises it's intrinsic to his very nature God always keeps his promises so in this month of Advent as we have been preparing ourselves to celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas we've been looking at the first book of the first chapter of the book of Luke first we saw the angel Gabriel he visited

Zechariah to tell him that his wife Elizabeth would give birth to a son Gabriel tells Zechariah that his son John would prepare people for the coming of their Savior Zechariah's response was perhaps unsurprising he struggles to believe Gabriel after all his wife Elizabeth was barren for many years and both he and Elizabeth were past the typical age of childbearing and as a result Zechariah was unable to speak he was struck mute for not believing that God had the power to give him and Elizabeth a son then Gabriel visits Mary tells her that she would also become pregnant Mary the virgin would become pregnant but she would carry the Messiah Jesus Christ the foretold Savior of the world and Mary responds with great reverence and surrender and finally last week we looked at Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth who was also pregnant carrying John the Baptist in her womb and we saw Mary's joy as she burst into song that beautiful song the Magnificat my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior and in today's passage which Iris so beautifully read

Elizabeth has just given birth eight days into the birth of their son John it was time to circumcise the baby in line with Jewish tradition and so family and neighbors they gather around expecting the excited parents to name their baby boy after his father Zechariah that would have been expected I guess honor the family's line honor the father's line by naming the firstborn son after the father but Elizabeth and Zechariah knew their son would be set apart remember the angel Gabriel said that John must never drink alcohol but instead would be filled with something different the Holy Spirit and so Elizabeth says no no no not Zechariah his name is John of course the neighbors don't believe her and so they go to the man and they say hey Zechariah what do you think of course he was still mute he grabs a writing tablet and he writes also his name is John

[8 : 58] John means God is gracious the birth of John would signal a new paradigm in the history of the world this era of grace that we all live in no longer would man only hear from God through prophets no longer would man need a priest to sacrifice animals to atone for our sins because of the birth of Jesus at Christmas you and I amazingly can have a personal intimate relationship with our creator God and through the cross of Christ we can be perfect before God himself and after nine months of waiting after nine months of not speaking imagine all the pent up things that Zechariah wanted to say reflecting on his visit with the angel Gabriel contemplating the implications of his son's birth Zechariah's tongue is finally loose and what does he say

I know what I would have said first of all I would have said finally I can talk thank you I can finally speak oh that was so difficult so many things I wanted to say I would have been self-focused or maybe we would have expected Zechariah to say thank you God for the birth of my son what a gift what a blessing it is to have a child is it not but Zechariah's first words are not about himself nor even about his son John Zechariah says blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has visited and redeemed his people Zechariah blesses God not for the birth of his son John but for fulfilling the promises that he made to Zechariah's forefathers to the people of Israel many many many years ago blessed be the Lord God of Israel the Benedictus let's consider these two parts of the Benedictus our savior is coming and preparing the way now in the Benedictus

Zechariah speaks of two Old Testament covenants they were about to be fulfilled in the birth of Jesus he refers to these covenants in a few ways or a few times in the Benedictus verse 70 as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old verse 72 to remember his holy covenant verse 73 the oath that he swore to our father Abraham these covenants weren't just made a few years before the birth of Jesus these were not spur of the moment decisions that God made when I struggled to think about what I want to give my kids for dinner at the last minute I'll order pizza on the Deliveroo God doesn't operate that way God doesn't make decisions like we do these covenants were hundreds and thousands of years in the making and what is a covenant?

well one way to think about a covenant is that it's a relationship between two parties that is one half legal and one half love a covenant is one half legal but it isn't just simply a business contract between two partners that is devoid of any love or intimacy a covenant is also one half love but it isn't like any relationship that can just be broken with no legal consequences the late Tim Keller said it like this a covenant is a relationship that is more loving and intimate than a merely legal relationship but more binding enduring and accountable than a merely personal relationship it's a stunning blend of law and love marriage is an example of a covenant husband and wife unite in love and under the law but of course in our day and age unfortunately divorce is quite common that this example of marriage doesn't fully capture the magnitude of the biblical covenants between God and his people and so what are these covenants that Zachariah so joyfully sings about that were about to be fulfilled in the birth of Jesus well the first is this so-called

Davidic covenant let's go to verse 68 the very first verse of the Benedictus blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David 1,000 years that's a long time 1,000 years before Zachariah was singing this Benedictus God entered into a covenant relationship with King David and in that covenant God promised David that one of his sons would be king would serve as king on his throne not just for one or two generations more but for all time for eternity and Zachariah being a priest knowing the scriptures filled with the Holy Spirit he invokes his prayer of blessing and praise of King David that King David made a thousand years before a blessed be the Lord God of Israel was the exact proclamation made by King David in the book of first kings

[14 : 25] David said this as he joyfully handed over the throne to his son Solomon as God had promised it was a tense time in the house of David David was getting old he was he was getting weak and many of his sons were jostling for the power of his throne but David held on to the promises that God made him back then Psalm 132 says the Lord swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back one of the sons of your body I was set on your throne 2 Samuel 7-16 God tells David your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me and I will establish your covenant forever also in Psalm 132 in verse 17 God declares that there I God will make a horn sprout for David and a thousand years later fast forward back to Zechariah

Zechariah sees that God was about to fulfill this promise to raise up this horn of salvation from the house of David this image of a horn is like the horn of a buffalo or an ox think about a buffalo lifting up his horns tossing them about in a display of strength and power the Messiah was about to come in strength and power and Zechariah sang the Benedictus with his closest friends and his family around him holding his eight day old baby John he had this vision that God was right on the cusp of fulfilling his covenant with David in the birth of Jesus for God always keeps his promises God always honors his covenants the Savior is coming and the second covenant that Zechariah references was between

God and Abraham this so called Abrahamic covenant verse 72 we read to show mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant the oath he swore to our father Abraham to grant us that we being delivered from our enemies might serve him without fear rewinding even further back from King David David was a thousand years Abraham was 1700 years before Zechariah in Genesis God in his sovereignty chose Abraham to be the father of Israel and as part of appointing Abraham to this crucial role God entered into a covenant with Abraham which covered a number of aspects I'll go over them quickly the verses are on the screen here I'm not going to read them out but you can reference them as I explain first that God would grant Abraham and Abraham's descendants their own land the land of Canaan forever and second that Abraham's descendants would be as the stars of heaven and as the sand on the seashore that the world over would be blessed through them but the overarching covering of this covenant promise was that God said to Abraham

Abraham I will be your God and you will be my people there was a relationship there an intimate loving relationship I will protect you I will cherish you I will care for you I will watch over you I will build you up and strengthen you you are my set apart people because of my love for you and to show Abraham that he would stand by his word to prove to Abraham the magnitude of this promise and to confirm to Abraham that he would indeed fulfill this covenant the God of the universe swore an oath on himself since there was no one else greater to swear by God swore an oath on himself kind of a weird thing to think about isn't swearing an oath like an earthly thing that people do in court maybe or maybe when really really really want to promise something will swear on someone's grave it's a weird thing to think about isn't it for God to do but the God who created the world God created the mountains the sky the sea and the stars he came down to the level of a man to help Abraham understand

Abraham this mere mortal to help him understand hey you can trust me my love for you for your people will cause me to enter into this covenant relationship with you driven by my love leave it to me I'll take care of it all you have to do trust me and obey me and this speaks to the nature of God we sang some of these we sang some of it today in these songs that God isn't far off living in some king's palace he is with us he understands us he's not far removed from day to day grind of what we go through every single day only communicating with us through middle men because of Christmas God was born into the world to become one of us to know us and for us to be able to know him and in the benedictus Zacharias sings that God indeed remembered his holy covenant that he swore to Abraham that this horn of salvation this Messiah would come to save

[20 : 04] Israel and what does Israel need saving from? verse 71 that we should be saved from our enemies from the hand of all who hate us for a thousand years since King David up until the birth of Jesus the people of Israel had been attacked persecuted exiled from their homeland by the Assyrians the Babylonians the Persians the Greeks and at the time of Zacharias singing this benedictus the Roman Empire controlled Israel and many in Israel knowing the Davidic and Abrahamic covenants were waiting with bated breath for the Savior to come with an army behind him with swords and chariots and spears to free Israel once and for all from the neighboring enemies but a neighboring enemy wasn't Israel's greatest but an enemy nation wasn't Israel's greatest enemy sin was Israel's greatest enemy Israel's constant sin was the reason was the reason why it faces constant military oppression and for us our stressful jobs our money problems these are real concerns

I don't want to diminish them these things that we are facing our kids getting into schools some of the things that I am thinking about even our health none of these are our greatest problem and none of these are actually our greatest enemy our greatest enemy is a sin that resides right here in my heart and in yours as well and maybe you're a Christian and you know this but you are struggling and actually that sin that enemy is winning the battle you know that that porn habit you've entertained has led to addiction and will corrupt the intimacy of marriage or maybe you know that deep down your security is found in your net worth in your bank account in your stocks and bonds that you hold in your real estate and money has gripped your heart and you find it difficult to give money back to God or maybe if you're truly honest with yourself Jesus is not your first love you say he is you sing it on Sunday mornings you talk about it in your CG but actually he's not something else is your first love maybe it's your job and your title the promotion you're seeking maybe it's your significant other or maybe it's a desire to have a significant other but hey let's not give up let's keep fighting that good fight of sin knowing that one day when the Lord returns again when Jesus returns all who trust him will be fully free of sin because the antidote to sin has come in the birth of Jesus this is the message of Christmas our Savior Christ was born into the world to save us from our sin and this morning if you're not a Christian here today this is the gospel we're all sinful every one of us me the person trying to give the sermon today

I'm sinful our wonderful music leaders who just sang beautifully and and facilitated a worship of God through music they're sinful all the leaders of this church are sinful the elders no one is perfect but God so loved the world that he made Abraham and David this promise that I will I will bring a Savior to come into the world to save you from your sin and God so loved the world that that promised Savior Jesus came to fulfill that promise to die in our place to defeat this enemy of sin so that we may receive freedom and eternal life and to do that which all of us were born to do to know our creator to be in communion with him to know and love him always as Hannah said to us a couple weeks ago during her baptism testimony to come home all God asks of us is to acknowledge that we're sinful and in need of the saving grace of Jesus that's it and so that's you this morning and you want to live in freedom let's chat after the service and for those of us here this morning who are followers of Jesus because God does indeed keep his promises we can look back at how he has fulfilled his promises to give us a confidence and faith to look ahead at this time of year many of us are probably doing a little recap of 2024 how did we do this year how much money did I make this year what did I accomplish this year how did I accomplish this year compared to previous years

I guess those are okay things to do I often do that myself but it's better to look back at the promises of God in our lives yes God has blessed many of us with our families our health our friendships but above all God has blessed us with Jesus his son our savior so this Christmas let's look back at the birth of the world's promised Messiah and be thankful and let the hope of Jesus give us joy and purpose in the year ahead as we face the joys of this year and the challenges of this year ahead and so as Zacharias sings of Jesus the savior has come to fulfill the promises of God how is Israel to respond to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days verse 74 now on the one hand verse 74 speaks about eternity in heaven in a way the promised Messiah

Jesus coming to save us from our sins the fulfillment of that is that one day if we truly love and trust Christ we will be with him forever in heaven and yes we will serve him in heaven in holiness in righteousness perfection for all time but it's also a call for us to respond to the gift of Jesus today right now and Zacharias son John the Baptist shows us the blueprint he shows us how to respond two thirds into the Benedictus Zacharias finally speaks into the life of his newborn son verse 76 and you child will be called the prophet of the most high for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins from birth actually before birth even in his womb

[27 : 03] John was set apart even in Elizabeth's womb John was set apart called by God to go before Jesus to prepare the people of Israel for the coming of Jesus what does it mean to prepare the way I used to work for a large US financial institution and one time the CEO from New York was he planned a visit to Hong Kong and before he came he asked his people to to liaise with us on the ground here in Hong Kong to prepare the way for the CEO to come to prepare the agenda of the meetings when he would come that type of stuff the CEO's people their job was to get the CEO ready and get us ready to prepare the way for the CEO to come to Hong Kong to meet us but the focus was never on the CEO's people the focus was on the CEO or it's like when a president visits a foreign country before the visit the president's officials would liaise with the host country's officials and set an agenda when the media can come visit when they shake hands together what would be discussed the agreements between two countries the job of the president's officials is to is to maximize the president's visit to provide focus to the president's visit but the focus was never on the president's people it's always on the president and John was to prepare the way for Jesus

John was opening act John was the appetizer warming up the stomach for the main course John himself even referred to his role as that of the best man at a wedding his purpose was to magnify the greatness of Jesus the groom John's job was to say hey Israel wake up I know it's been 400 years God hasn't spoken to us it seems that we're kind of in the dumps Romans still oppress us but hey tide is turning the sun will rise again so get ready pull up your socks the most important time of your life is upon us focus the foretold savior is finally here and for those of us who are followers of Jesus John's calling is also our calling as well we're called to be little John's not Johnny Lynn or

John Jr that's a different little John but like John the Baptist who prepared the way for the first coming of Jesus our calling is to prepare the way for the second coming of Jesus and like in John's time in our day and age people are confused people are distracted by the things of the world people are putting their energy into work and money and pleasure and all these things but they're grasping at straws and they don't know Jesus of course as a father of three a busy guy I understand we are busy one of the biggest challenges in Hong Kong is that our works are just so overwhelming and the city is just so fast paced and we have so many worries I get it I'm not going to throw on you guys on us a billion different to-do lists or approaches or techniques in sharing the gospel but I want to just ask us this week to spend time reflecting on two things the first is this what is our own conviction that the gospel is good news and so desperately needed in our own hearts and lives especially at Christmas how much of our joy at Christmas if we really think about it is coming from the thought that no need to go to work

I'm going to fly off soon to some hot or cold place have a great lot of fun that is what I'm looking forward to that is really why I love Christmas and by the way again I am going on holiday too so I'm not judging anyone here but how much of our joy at Christmas is when we reflect when we're by ourselves or with our community group or with our family of God we're reflecting of how amazing the love of Christ he came into the world to love us to die for our sins so one reflecting on the gospel in our own hearts and second what is our own intentionality in sharing the gospel I was so encouraged Hannah where are you Hannah that was such an encouraging testimony thank you so much for sharing Simon Sherman incredible example for all of us what is our own intentionality in sharing the gospel now sometimes it's simply helpful to sit down and think why has God put certain people in my life the friends you grew up with your fellow colleagues at the trenches at work that you see ten hours a day your neighbors in your building the buddies you see each week when you hang out or play sports with them why has God put them in your life probably a reason for that if they don't know him and name them as you pray for God's spirit to move their hearts to know him but don't just pray for them build an authentic relationship with them get to know them well understand them pray for God to move you to share the gospel with them and when he does prompt you to do so be ready to do it

[35 : 35] Father God thank you blessed be the Lord God of Israel thank you God for Jesus Christ our Lord we acknowledge that Jesus could have stayed in heaven forever he was very comfortable more than comfortable there and yet he was born into this world this broken world he was born into this world in such a humble fashion in a lowly manger in a backwards town of Bethlehem that no one knew about because of his love for us his great love thank you that you're not a whimsical God who makes spirit of the moment decisions and promises that you make your promises and you keep your promises and help us this week God as we go about spending time with family celebrating Christmas seeing some friends catching up opening presents perhaps flying off maybe help us to remember and reflect on this great promise you have fulfilled in the birth of Christ in the cross of Christ the saving grace of Christ and maybe be a church God maybe have boldness and courage to do what

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