

Sermon on Luke, 1, 67-79, 03.12.2006

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Text:

67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: 68 ' Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. 69 He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David, 70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, 71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. 72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, 73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us 74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. 76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, 77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. 78 By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, 79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

Dear congregation, what does actually happen in this text? It is taken out of context and if you have no idea who Zechariah is and why he is chanting this song of praise, you probably get nothing out of it.

Zechariah is a priest at the temple in Jerusalem, when he and his wife Elisabeth live. One day an Angel appears before him in the temple, while he was on duty, who foretells him the birth of his son. Now, Zechariah is usually a pious man, but he has problems to believe what he just heard. How can I know that this will actually happen? Are I and also my wife not too old to have children? And so far we have not been able to have children, so why now? Those are the questions he does not only ask himself, but also the angel. The angel replies:

'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

Zechariah pays with muteness for his disbelief. It would be good, if we could keep this in mind, because I would like to get back to this later on. So, Zechariah is mute until the day when his son, whom he shall call John is born. Suddenly he can speak again and then says the words I have been reading to you in the beginning. Zechariah's song does not only praise God, but also talks about his son who will be go before the Lord, Jesus, and prepare his way. We know it already this son of his is no other than John the Baptist, a great-cousin of Jesus, the one who will baptize Jesus in the Jordan River.

Dear congregation, so much about the biblical context, but the question is, whether we also gather what the text also talks about, which is less obvious. I do not know whether anyone of you has noticed, that God with his plan, to make John so special, comes with it in the midst of the every day life of people.

You need to know, Zechariah is not the only priest at the temple. There were approximately 7.200 of them, 300 hundred simultaneously on duty every single day. Zechariah does not do anything special, he just does what he has dedicated his life for, he is a priest, doing his job, until God sends his angel and declares to him: a) You will have a son, even if you think this is impossible, b) He will be something very special and you shall call him John, which means "God is merciful".

God appears, if you which, in the midst of the daily routine. He seeks out this priest who does not even stem from the most prominent tribes of the priests. He changes everything around and gives hope against all likelihood. God can do this. He does not have to care about whether things were so ever since or can't be

changed in the eyes of men. God breaks through all the laws of circumstance and works the extraordinary. He gives hope, where there was no hope.

God repeats this, by the way, on a way higher level of changing things through the birth of Christ. This is also a story which we never ever could have predicted and which no one could just have made up. Christ is born, a story which changes everything, this world and our faith.

The song and the story of Zechariah is only a foretaste and a prediction of much greater things to come, but still: This story already sends a message of hope into this world, and talks about hope in a way, we could not tell ourselves. A hope, which we at times do not see, but in which we already can believe.

And this, dear congregation, is Advent: Hoping for, what we can not see yet. Holding on to a hope, which outshines everything else. And the hope that God can come anytime into this world, into the midst of our lives to change things around completely.

This year I studied the origin of all the customs which over the course of many centuries have made this season of Advent to what we know it now, with all the decoration, the cookies, the Singing of songs, the lights and the Advent wreath and all of that. I have noticed that in the beginning all those things were pointing to something which also appears in this story our sermon text talks about: All Advent customs had one purpose: to symbolize the message of Jesus, the light of the world. And to talk about his coming. The story of John the Baptist and the role of John himself is only to give witness of the light which is Christ and to prepare his way. Do you understand? Advent has never been the time just of cookies and shopping, but was filled with the great expectation of the coming of Christ, the redeemer. Everything people did in this time of year was plain and simple and close to the message.

In the conversation with the kids and in my radio devotion today I explained that the original Advent wreath had 28 candles. Hinrich Wichern, a German Pastor who invented this custom, had to come up with something to explain the idea of Christ, being the light of the world, to youth at risk, he had been caring for in his institution he founded in 1833. 24 candles for every day, plus four for each Sunday. At Christmas Eve, everyone could easily make out how bright the light of Christ shines into this world. That was 150 years ago.

What has become of Advent in our time. I guess, everyone of you could answer this question. We have somehow lost this connection with Christ. Advent today is something completely different and does not breathe the character of being a big sign pointing towards Christ. The signs today point to shopping and the message is: It's Advent hurry up!. Advent is no longer a season of its own. It is pre-Christmas, it's a boiler for Christmas, in which the only arrival we celebrate is the arrival of Santa, the coca-cola advertisement figure, who arrives before Christ the King Sunday (which I find a little tasteless) only to be available for some weeks to pose for family pictures in the shopping malls.

Go to someone and say: Isn't it exciting that Christ will come soon into the darkness of this world? They will have you checked out by a doctor. But Christ coming, bringing light, being the light of this world which is still full of darkness isn't this the message we actually need, also personally.

Jesus came for those people, the healthy do not need a physician but the sick.

I instantly understood: God comes for those people as well. Do we give Christ still the chance to shine as a light for the marginalized, because we have declared Advent a private celebration?

Christ does not come to the privileged only.

We have made faith a private thing and do not recognize the universal claim God makes by sending his son.

Isaiah:

*But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

2*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

3You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

4For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

5For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

6For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named

Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. No small little neat Jesus baby, but the ruler of the world who comes to erect his kingdom of justice and peace.

Micah:

2*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

4And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;

5and he shall be the one of peace.

*And the Peace of God which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.*