

2021 Christmas Message

THE RISING SUN

Luke 1:57–80

Key Verses: 1:78–79

“...because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

Have you ever gotten lost in the dark? It can be awful—wandering around for hours, not knowing where you’re going. It takes just a brief moment in the dark to make a wrong choice that confuses us and sends us in the totally wrong direction. With technology, we don’t struggle so much with physical darkness anymore. But spiritual darkness is another story. All our technologies and abilities can’t help us at all. It may sound only vaguely symbolic, but spiritual darkness is real. It’s not just outside us; it’s within us. Anger, sadness and fear are just a few of its symptoms. Christmas is supposed to be a happy time, so we try to shake off any negativity and get busy with all kinds of preparations. But no amount of activities can root out the darkness within us. There’s only one way to come out of it. We all need Jesus, the rising sun. Today we want to reflect on what it means that Jesus is “the rising sun” and how we can experience his light shining on us. May God speak to us through his living word today.

In Luke 1–2 John is born as the forerunner of the Messiah, and Jesus is born as the Messiah promised to come. Both their births are such good news. But in these interwoven stories Luke is showing us that though John is great, the greatness of Jesus is beyond comparison. God is sending Jesus, the Holy One, his own Son, to fulfill all his promises and be the Savior and light for all peoples on earth (1:32,35; 2:30–32; Ac26:23; cf. Isa42:6; 49:6; 60:1,3,19–20).

Let’s review the context briefly. Surprisingly, it all begins with an elderly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. Luke tells us they’re both from priestly families (5). They’re both righteous in God’s sight (6). Still, they’re childless, and now they’re both very old (7). Of all the couples in the world, God chooses *them* to be the parents of the forerunner of Jesus. It’s to show that “nothing will be impossible with God” (37, ESV). While Zechariah is serving as priest at the temple, God sends the angel Gabriel to tell him the good news (8–13), but Zechariah finds it hard to believe (18). So the angel tells him he’s going to lose his ability to speak until the baby is born (19–20). When elderly Elizabeth becomes pregnant, she’s sure it’s from God. After a lifetime of barrenness, she deeply experiences God’s favor (24–25). Six months later she’s visited by her relative Mary, a young unwed virgin who’s conceived Jesus through the Holy Spirit (39–40). When they meet, Elizabeth’s unborn child leaps in her womb, and Elizabeth is

filled with the Holy Spirit (41). She can see clearly that Mary is “the mother of [her] Lord,” and she tells her she’s so blessed (42–45).

Look at verse 57. When the time comes to deliver her own child, Elizabeth *survives*, even though she’s so old! On top of that, just as the angel had said, she delivers a *healthy baby boy*! Verse 58 says that it’s God’s “great mercy,” and her neighbors and relatives, who used to despise her, are now sharing her joy. Eight days later they keep the covenant of circumcision, and people want to name him after his father Zechariah (59), but Elizabeth says his name should be “John” (60). She means no disrespect to her husband; she simply wants to obey the angel. The name “John” means, “The Lord has been gracious.” What a beautiful name! We see God’s graciousness, not only to this elderly couple, but also in all God is doing here to carry out his plan to save the world. But the name “John” doesn’t follow their custom to choose a relative’s name for their son (61). People turn to Zechariah (62). Despite his still being mute, he obeys the angel’s words and names his son “John” (63). Miraculously, he can speak again, and his first words are praise to God (64). People are filled with awe, talking and wondering about the child’s future (65–66). Luke quietly comments: “For the Lord’s hand was with him” (67). Being so old, Zechariah and Elizabeth probably aren’t able to be with their child for long. But God’s own hand is with him.

Earlier, Luke recorded the song of Mary (46–55). Her main theme was how God works through humble people who fear him. Now, he records the song of Zechariah (67–79). It’s a prophecy, inspired by the Holy Spirit. We would expect Zechariah to sing about finally having a son, but his song is mainly about Jesus. Let’s think about his song in three parts.

First, God’s mercy and faithfulness to save his people (68–75). Read verse 68. “He has come.” In Greek it literally says “he has visited.” This Greek word is repeated in verse 78, where it can be translated: “...the sunrise shall *visit* us from on high” (ESV; cf. Ac15:14; 1Pe2:12). “He has visited.” For over 400 years God has sent no prophet to his people. He’s left them alone to experience the consequences of their many sins. But God has not abandoned them. Through the miraculous births of John and Jesus, God isn’t sending someone else; he’s coming *in person*. Especially through the birth of Jesus, God has forever visited each of us personally (Jn1:14a). We were his enemies (Ro5:10), we were unfaithful, but “he has visited” us. It’s why, at Christmastime, it’s good to *visit* someone with whom we have a broken relationship. In life, sometimes we feel lonely or abandoned, but the truth that God has visited us through the birth of Jesus comforts us so deeply. Verse 68 adds that he’s “redeemed” us. This word means “bought back.” It means that in Jesus we belong to God again. We used to think we belonged to ourselves. Actually, we belonged to the world, and to sin and Satan, and this was the cause of all our miseries. But Jesus redeemed us; he bought us back for God.

Read verse 69. Two things are important here. First is “in the house of his servant David.” It means in David’s family line. Jesus’ birth in David’s line fulfilled God’s promises through his holy prophets of long ago (70; e.g. 2Sa7:12–13; Isa 9:6–7). Second is “a horn of salvation.” In the Bible a horn symbolizes strength. David himself was like a horn of salvation for Israel. Even as a young man, he had God’s power to defeat intimidating enemies like Goliath.

But at the end of his life he testified that God was his real “horn” (2Sa22:1–3; Ps18:2). And God promised to send someone in David’s line to be the most powerful one ever (Ps89:19–29).

Jesus fulfills all these promises of God. In fact, his very name, “Jesus,” means “the Lord saves.” In this passage the word “salvation” is repeated three times (69,71,77). The Israelites had enemies fighting them for land. But Jesus came to save us from our real enemies, sin and Satan. How does he save us? Through his death and resurrection Jesus crushes Satan under our feet (Ge3:15; Ro16:20). The Bible says Jesus came to destroy the devil’s work (1Jn3:8b). It says here, “...and from the hand of all who hate us” (71b). It’s not just the Israelites’ story. When we follow Jesus, people still hate us. It’s unavoidable. Jesus told us we’ll be hated, excluded, insulted and rejected because of our faith in him (6:22). He taught us not to fight back, but to love enemies, do good to them, bless and pray for them (6:27–28). Faith in Jesus our “horn of salvation” gives us the victory that overcomes the world (1Jn5:5).

Why did God send Jesus to save us? Look at verses 72–73. It was to show mercy to our spiritual ancestors, going back not only to David but all the way back to our father of faith Abraham (Ro4:16; Gal3:7). It shows both God’s mercy and his faithfulness. What a beautiful combination! God is merciful, and he’s faithful. God in his mercy swore to Abraham that through his offspring all nations on earth would be blessed (Ge12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). To keep this promise, God in his great faithfulness sent Jesus to bless all the families on earth (Ac3:25).

Zechariah describes what our lives are like after God saves us. Read verses 74–75. Frankly it’s easy to misunderstand God’s mercy and faithfulness. We think we can commit sin and later come back to God for his mercy and faithfulness. But God doesn’t want us to stay on a self-centered merry-go-round of sin. He wants to get off that hypnotizing ride and start serving him right now. In Greek, “to serve him” literally means “to worship him.” In his great mercy and faithfulness God saves us so that we, in turn, can really worship him. “Worship” isn’t just an hour ritual on Sundays; we worship and serve God every day, all day long, in all that we do (Ro12:1). We worship and serve him without fear—fear of what people think, fear of failure or persecution, or even fear of survival. This is what God’s salvation really looks like: a new, holy, courageous life, a life faithfully worshipping and serving the Lord, all our days. It may seem too hard for weak and flawed sinners like us, but it says here God “enables” us to live such a beautiful life. In a sense verses 74–75 look forward to the promise of the Holy Spirit: only as we learn to live by the Spirit can we be empowered to live for God faithfully (Lk24:49; Ac1:8; Eph3:16–19). Praise God for his great faithfulness and mercy to save us! Praise God who enables us to live faithful lives worshipping him!

Second, “prepare the way for him” (76). In verse 76 Zechariah turns briefly to his newborn son. For many young couples, a newborn takes over all of life. But Zechariah can see his baby John through the lens of God’s history. He sees clearly how God is planning to use this child. Though he and his wife are so old, he’s not worried; he’s sure of God’s special purpose. In fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, his son John would prepare the way for the Lord (Isa40:3–5). He would turn people back to God, to seek the forgiveness of sins through repentance and faith in Jesus (77; Ac2:38). To prepare us for Jesus, Luke’s Gospel emphasizes the word “repent” (3:3,8; 5:32;

10:13; 13:3,5; 15:7,10; 16:30; 17:3–4; 24:47). It means not only to “feel sorry” but also to “turn.” The best way to prepare for Christmas is to repent: turn away from our sin and turn to Jesus.

Third, “the rising sun” (77–79). In this last part Zechariah expresses our salvation in Jesus in a most profound way. Read verse 77. Partly these words refer to John’s ministry, but in a deeper sense they point to Jesus. What is “the knowledge of salvation”? It’s not mere intellectual knowledge of theological truths; “the knowledge of salvation” is an experience (cf. Jer31:34; Heb8:11–12). How can we know and be sure we’re saved? The only way is through experiencing God’s forgiveness. So, how can we be really sure of God’s forgiveness? People may seem to forgive us, but later we realize they’re still holding grudges. Only Jesus really gives us the forgiveness of sins. Why does God’s forgiveness come only through Jesus? Because only Jesus paid for our forgiveness through his death on a cross. Only Jesus shed his blood to forgive our sins. Only the shed blood of Jesus can cleanse our guilt and purify us from all sin (Heb9:14; 1Jn1:7). Only when we accept how much Jesus suffered on the cross for us can we be fully convinced he’s forgiven all our sins. This is real “knowledge of salvation.” This knowledge of salvation brings us into the light.

Earlier, Zechariah used the phrase “a horn of salvation” referring to the mightiest weapon. In her song Mary also described God as “the Mighty One,” stronger than the strongest (49,51–53). We like this Mighty God. But now Zechariah describes him differently. Read verse 78. It’s the third time in the passage and fifth time in the chapter Luke mentions God’s “mercy.” Here Luke calls it God’s “tender mercy.” In Greek the word for “tender” means “kind,” “affectionate,” “compassionate,” “able to feel deeply for others.” It’s out of his tender mercy that God wants to save us. Though we can be so sinful, so difficult to deal with, Jesus was born as God’s tender mercy to us. We don’t earn his mercy through our intense efforts. Just the opposite: our self-righteousness and sins make us ugly and wretched. But God isn’t disgusted; he longs to heal and save us, because of his tender mercy. As his people we need to be growing in his tender mercy for one another (cf. Php2:1; Col3:12).

Read verse 78 again. The rising sun is a stunning illustration of God’s tender mercy. Why? Partly it’s because of its scope. Whether we live in a resort or a slum, whether we’re young or old, whatever our race or religion or politics, everyone on earth has access to the rising sun. Jesus says elsewhere that God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good” (Mt5:45). The sunrise is such a beautiful moment, as this fiery globe slowly peeks over the horizon and fills the eastern sky with gorgeous colors. Even before it happens, birds and other creatures sense it and start singing. It suggests how God wants his salvation to reach everyone, everywhere.

But it’s not just a spectacular scene; the rising sun signifies something deeply spiritual. Read verse 79. It’s poetic and beautiful, but these words also remind us of how bad the darkness can be. In the middle of a Chicago night we sometimes hear a siren, a screaming voice, or gunshots. In the darkness of the night we can lie awake with worries and fears and wonder how we can keep going. But what if we were “living” in such darkness constantly? It’s happening not only at night; we can be “living in darkness” on a sunny day. The essence of

living in darkness is that we can't see well, so we can't function. In darkness we make terrible mistakes. We misunderstand many things. We easily get hurt. As we live in it, the darkness grows in us. We become bitter. We learn to hate. We hold grudges. Worst of all, we begin to love darkness (Jn3:19). In return, it fills us with guilt and fear. So it's paralleled here with "the shadow of death." Death is the ultimate darkness for every human being. This darkness of death hangs over us like a vague shadow, making all of life seem meaningless. The world offers no relief from this spiritual darkness.

But no matter how long or dark the night may seem, in the morning the sun always rises. Beginning as a faint glow, it grows ever so slowly and gently. In its light all creation awakens and finds hope for a new day. It's an allegory of the light of our Savior Jesus. He said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn8:12). His resurrection from the dead is especially like the rising sun. It brings new life and new hope for all the world. God doesn't switch him on like a blinding floodlight to intimidate us into submission. In his tender mercy God brings Jesus into our lives like the quiet and gentle rising sun. As we learn to walk in his light, he guides our feet into the path of peace. It's a path of peace with God, and peace with others. It's a new way of living, in the peace of God's forgiveness.

The rising sun Jesus gives us the best Christmas gift: God's salvation. When we come to him, he opens our eyes and turns us from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God; we receive forgiveness of sins and a place among God's holy people, by faith (Ac26:18). Still, we all have to live in this real world, with all its darkness and shadows of death. So, like the rising sun, we all need to experience the light of Jesus every day. As we turn to him, he makes his light shine in our hearts and renews us day by day (2Co4:6,16). He heals us from the darkness in our souls. He gives us his Spirit so that we can be faithful to God, worshipping and serving him without fear. In his light, we grow in showing others God's tender mercy. In his light, we experience deeper and deeper the peace of God's forgiveness. All we have to do is to turn from our darkness, turn from the world, turn from our sin and welcome the rising sun, Jesus.