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 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent

***The Promise of Compassion***  
***Luke 1:68-79***

Then John's father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

<sup>68</sup> *“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
 for he has **looked favorably on**<sup>[g]</sup> his people and **redeemed** them.  
<sup>69</sup> He has **raised up a mighty savior**<sup>[h]</sup> for us  
 in the house of his child David,  
<sup>70</sup> as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,  
<sup>71</sup> that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate  
 us.  
<sup>72</sup> Thus he has shown the **mercy** promised to our ancestors  
 and has remembered his holy covenant,  
<sup>73</sup> the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,  
 to grant us <sup>74</sup> that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,  
 might serve him without fear, <sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness  
 in his presence all our days.  
<sup>76</sup> And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,  
 for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
<sup>77</sup> to give his people knowledge of salvation  
 by the forgiveness of their sins.  
<sup>78</sup> Because of the **tender mercy** of our God,  
 the **dawn from on high will break**<sup>[i]</sup> **upon**<sup>[j]</sup> **us,**  
<sup>79</sup> **to shine upon those** who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
 to guide our feet **into the way of peace.**”*

***These are the words of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist.***

The story of John's birth is the **context** of this beautiful prophecy.

Here is what happens before our reading today:

*Once when Zechariah was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, <sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. <sup>10</sup> Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside.*

<sup>11</sup> Then there appeared to him **an angel of the Lord**, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. <sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him, “**Do not be afraid, Zechariah**, for your prayer has been heard. **Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son**, and you will name him John. <sup>14</sup> You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be **filled with the Holy Spirit**. <sup>16</sup> He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

<sup>17</sup> With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to **turn the hearts** of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

<sup>18</sup> Zechariah said to the angel, “**How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.**” <sup>19</sup> The angel replied, “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**. <sup>20</sup> But 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.”

When John was born,  
it was assumed that the boy would be **named after Zechariah**,  
but Elizabeth said no--and then Zechariah wrote on a tablet  
**the name for the child: John.**

After he did that, he could **speak again**,  
and he started to **prophecy** the promises we hear today.

**So these are words of a man unable to speak for months**,  
a man who has just seen the child he thought he would NEVER have,  
a man who has witnessed Mary coming in her pregnancy  
to stay with his wife Elizabeth,  
a man who has literally been **overwhelmed by the work of God** all around him!

**And when he can speak, he prophesies about God’s compassion!**

The promises of God’s compassion,  
and tender mercies.

**The word COMPASSION means to be concerned for the suffering of others**,  
And God is definitely concerned for our suffering.  
In the Gospel, the Greek word here for **mercy** means compassion, and kindness.

So, I wonder—

***when have you seen or experienced the compassion and mercy of God?***

Have you ever been *overwhelmed* by God's compassion—for yourself or others?

I believe that when someone dies a tragic death, or a child loses their life,

***That God is the first one to cry.***

***Our God is a compassionate and merciful God.***

***We know that Jesus was compassionate.***

He wept with friends who were mourning,

And he had so much compassion for those who were hurting  
that he welcomed everyone.

***In the story of the feeding of the 5,000, it says that he had great compassion***

for the crowd, and that word literally means that he was hurting in his gut for them.

Time and again, Jesus showed this compassion—

for the sick, the sinners, the outcast, the strangers, the marginalized, the oppressed.

Compassion is part of the ***character of Jesus.***

***And here, Zechariah is prophesying that this is who God has always been,***

And we have been promised in scripture—that we will see God's tender mercies.

For Zechariah, this meant that his own son John would pave the way

for the Savior who would embody God's compassion and mercy.

Today we continue our Advent theme from Duke Professor Kate Bowler's  
devotional, entitled '***A Weary World Rejoices***'.

It's from the first verse of the hymn '***O Holy Night***'

*A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices*

And that weary world—is us!

***We are ALL weary, in some way or another, aren't we?***

And yet during this season we can find reasons for joy.

Because it is the season of Christ's birth.

***And In Zechariah's prophecy,***

***we hear some reasons for rejoicing—especially about the tender mercies of God.***

The tender mercy of our Savior Jesus.

Kate Bowler says that “*Advent is the **anticipation of God’s compassion** revealing itself through Emmanuel, God with us.*”

She goes on to say that “*Jesus is God with us, so he could be **God’s compassion for us**....Jesus’ compassion says I’m not just helping you, **I am with you**”*

It’s like the **great Bible verse** that so many of us know my heart, John 3:16:  
*For God so **LOVED** the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

But it only makes sense with the next verse 17:

<sup>17</sup> “*Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be **SAVED** through him.*

***Do you know what the key verbs are, in those verses?***

***Loved and Saved.***

That’s our God—we have a God of **love and salvation**, not condemnation.

And Jesus came out of **love and salvation for the whole world**—

so our God is a God for **all people**,

not a God of exclusion.

***Mother Teresa once said that the problem in our world is that we have forgotten that we belong to one another.***

What about us?

Have we forgotten that?

How could we bring that back to our hearts and lives this Christmas?

***You know that old saying, ‘walk a mile in someone else’s shoes’?***

It means that we don’t know what someone is going through,

until we walk a mile in their shoes....

***Well, Jesus did that for us, on a grand scale!***

As Eugene Peterson writes in The Message Bible translation of John 1:14:

*The Word became flesh and blood,*

*and moved into the neighborhood.*

***Jesus came—to BE one of us.***

That he might understand us, help us, save us,

And have the **utmost compassion** for us.

***It reminds me of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 1:3-5:***

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the Father of mercies and the God of all **comfort**,*

*<sup>4</sup> who **comforts us** in all our affliction,*

*so that we may be able to **comfort those** who are in any affliction  
with the **comfort** with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*

*<sup>5</sup> For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us,  
so also **our comfort is abundant** through Christ.*

***Do you ever think about the COMFORT of God?***

The ways that God has shown compassion—to you?

It doesn't have to be anything supernatural,

It might just be when someone lent an ear to listen to your story,

Or brought a meal when you were grieving,

Or gave you a call when you were lonely.

When has the compassion of God been evident in your life?

***And how might you return that to someone else?***

You know, we hear about the compassion and mercy of God in some very  
***unexpected places in the Bible.***

There's one book where you really wouldn't expect to hear  
about God's compassion, mercy or hope.

***It's the Book of Lamentations in the Old Testament.***

Lamentations is as the name suggests, a book of lament and mourning,

Likely written by the "weeping prophet" Jeremiah--

during and after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC to Babylon.

It is a collection of poems, describing the ***suffering and despair*** of God's people.

***But right in the middle of Lamentations 3:22-23,***

***we hear some incredible words of comfort,***

words you might be familiar with,

if you've ever sung the famous hymn *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*.

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,<sup>[b]</sup>*

***his mercies never come to an end;***

<sup>23</sup> ***they are new every morning;***

***great is your faithfulness.***

***Did you hear that promise?***

***That God's mercies are NEW every morning?***

I don't know about you, but I can always use that reminder!

That no matter what happens, a new day dawns, and so do God's mercies.

It's just as Zechariah prophesied:

*Because of the tender mercy of our God,*

*the DAWN from on high will break upon us,*

*<sup>79</sup> to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,*

*to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

***Maybe the next time you see the sun come up,***

Think about the mercies of God that are also dawning.

***Maybe the next time you see a candle lit,***

Like on this Advent wreath,

Think about the mercy of God—that light---that shines into our darkness.

***Friends, when have you seen the mercy and compassion of God?***

Can you think of a time you witnessed it,

in your life, or in the life of someone else?

Once we've seen God's mercy---

What if we were to join God's mercy at work in the world?

***by showing kindness and compassion this Christmas?***

***What acts of kindness can YOU do—***

Could you make a commitment to do one *every day of this Advent season?*

***It could be small.***

It could be as simple as a little card, a call, text, visit,

a small gift,

or an act of kindness like shopping for someone, picking up dinner,

watching someone's child,

there's literally no end to the possibilities for showing compassion....

***I urge you to grab a calendar or your phone, and make a note each day***

of something you can do for someone else, no matter how small.

I think it could do a lot for us—

a lot of healing in our hearts,

because we will see that Christmastime is not just about us,  
it's not just about our families,  
***it's about the coming of Jesus—a Savior of Compassion.***  
The coming of Jesus—the God of tender mercy.

***And what better way to celebrate, than to show compassion, ourselves?***

***Friends, the Good News of the Gospel today is God's compassion,***  
And the comfort of our Savior Jesus Christ.  
May we choose to ***join God in the ministry of compassion,***  
By sharing our own kindness and mercy to those all around us.  
And for this opportunity, all God's people can say together, Amen.