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Luke 1:57-80
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We Allow Ourselves to be Amazed

When was the last time you laid on your back and gazed up at the night sky? And you considered the vastness of the universe that Jesus created. And not only did Jesus create them, but he knows each one intimately and calls them out by name, every night.¹ It's just beyond human comprehension.

The latest images from space just came out in early November. They combine the infrared data taken from the James Webb Space Telescope and the visible light images from the Hubble Space Telescope.

This first image is of the Galaxy Cluster MACS 0416. The bluest galaxies are those nearest to earth and often show intense star formation. The redder galaxies are the furthest from earth and oldest and often show dust which could be residual after stars die. So again, we see the birth of stars and the death of stars all in the same image.

The second image is of the Sagittarius C by the James Webb Space Telescope. It measures 50 light years wide and covers the Milky Way's dense center. One light year is approximately 6 trillion miles. If you traveled 40,000 miles per hour, it would take you about 400 years to cross it. There are an estimated 500,000 stars in this image alone.

In this final image taken by the James Webb Space Telescope, we can see a star's final moments before it dies.

Absolutely amazing. Awesome!

Presbyterian Pastor Cort Gatliff wrote, "We tend to feel awe when we are confronted by great beauty combined with great power or mystery." Awe takes our attentions off ourselves and creates wonder. Wonder drives us to contemplate the bigger questions of life. "And wonder culminates in worship as we contemplate the one who created that of which we are in awe."²

In 1885, Swedish poet and politician, Carl Boberg, was walking home along Sweden's southeastern coast when a thunderstorm broke out. The thunderclouds roared. The rains pounded down. And then afterwards, came a magnificent rainbow.

When he got home, he threw open his windows to hear church bells in the distance calling people to worship from all over the bucolic countryside. He was

¹ Isaiah 40:26

² Cort Gatliff, 'A Midnight Clear, God's Promises Shine Brightest When We Turn Out The Lights,' *Christianity Today*, December 2023, 42.

amazed between the juxtaposition between the fierceness of the storm and the beauty that surrounded him.

It was then that he wrote the words to a poem called, “O Store Gud,” translated “O Mighty God.” Soon the words were put to the tune of a Swedish folk song and the song gained instant popularity in Sweden. Eventually the song was translated into German, then Russian, and made its debut in American Christianity by the Billy Graham Crusades.

The song? “How Great Thou Art.” Its timelessness acknowledges the awesomeness of God as displayed in the works of creation and the sending of his Son, Jesus.

At the end of each stanza, the song bursts forth with “Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee, How great Thou art, How great Thou art.” It’s like we can’t contain our need to rejoice at the goodness of God. We can’t help but sing.

That’s where we find Zechariah in our story today as we continue our journey through Advent. As you’ve noticed, we’ve spent the entire time focusing on Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John the Baptist and haven’t heard much of Mary or Joseph for that matter. The reason is that Zechariah and Elizabeth hold this tension of light and darkness and rejoicing weariness so beautifully. They’ve experienced great loss and undeniable joy simultaneously. And today we see how Zechariah in allowing himself to be amazed by God’s faithfulness amidst his darkness, was set free from his inability to speak. The first thing he does upon John’s birth, after confirming the baby’s name, was to break out in song, praising God for his faithfulness.

How Great Thou Art!

Please join me as we read from Luke 1:57-80 and we hear this great story for ourselves.

57 When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son.

58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, **60** but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.”

61 They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”

62 Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. **63** He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” **64** Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. **65** All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these

things. **66** Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

67 His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

68 “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David

70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

71 salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—

72 to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,

73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear

75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,

78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

79 to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

80 And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

When our children were little, one of our favorite things to do during the Christmas season was to drive around the neighborhood and look at Christmas lights. We’d put the kids in their footie pajamas and give them hot cocoa in their sippie cups. As we would drive up to a house, they would proclaim, “Oooh lights!!!” It was so thrilling.

It is so wonderful to experience Christmas through the eyes of children. Everything is so spectacular. They never cease to be amazed.

When was the last time you felt awe or amazement?

I remember the sentiment expressed at the Hanging of the Greens service when we turned off the lights in the sanctuary and turned on the lights of the

Christmas tree and back wall. Everyone gasped at how beautiful it was. “Oooh lights!”

There is something about Christmas lights that expel the dark and dreariest days of winter. Hope that something good would come after the darkest nights were over.

As we consider the awesomeness of God and allow ourselves to be amazed by a story that we have heard many times, I want to first take a look at the entire Bible story to see where John the Baptist fits within greater scope of what God was doing. Sort of like looking at the entire Milky Way instead of just zooming into look at one star in it. Then I want us to see how Zechariah responds to the amazement as the Angel Gabriel’s words had come true. And finally we will see how the community of faith should respond as we witness God’s joy breaking into our darkness.

So first, lets travel through scripture at 40,000 miles per hour and summarize God’s story. Notice the thread of amazing light that runs through it.

In Genesis “God said, ‘Let there be light, and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light day, and the darkness he called night. And there was evening, and there was morning - the first day.’”³

Shortly after God created the first humans to inhabit the earth as a reflection of God’s self and for God’s glory. But humans wanted to be like God, so they sinned, fell out of the blessedness of the garden, and chose to live in darkness and chaos.

Over time, people continued to become so evil that God decided to destroy what was created and start over. So God sent a flood that destroyed the earth and everything that lived within it, but saving a remnant for himself. Noah and his family.

Then after the flood, God promised humanity that God would never again destroy the earth and sealed the promise with light shining through the floodwaters which we know as rainbow.⁴ This new promise was a based on a covenant between God and God’s people. In a covenant, one party agrees to one thing, while the other agrees to do the other. God always held up God’s end of the bargain, but his people could not do it on their own. They were always bent toward destruction.

Humans continued to walk in darkness and away from the light, for thousands of years.

³ Genesis 1:3-5

⁴ Genesis 9:12-16

Until, the Prophet Isaiah said, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”⁵

Isaiah also said that a new root or Messiah would come from the line of Jesse, a branch of King David, who would bear good fruit, and judge the nations with righteousness and justice, finally bringing shalom to the world.⁶ This Messiah would be born to a virgin who would give birth to a son, and call him Immanuel, which means God with us.⁷

Then came four hundred years of silence. No word at all from God. No light. Just darkness.

Finally, hope had dawned as the beginning of John’s Gospel that pointed to that new thing that God was doing.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He, [Jesus, Immanuel] was with God in the beginning. **3** Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. **4** In him was life, and that life was the light of all humankind. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John [John the Baptist whose parents were Zechariah the temple priest and Elizabeth]. **7** [John] came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. **8** He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.⁸

Then after John’s birth, we see how Mary, the virgin, gave birth to her first born son, and called him Jesus or Yeshua, which means “He who saves.”

“Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and others.”⁹ After that Jesus started his public ministry saying to the people, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”¹⁰ Hear that reference to the words of the Prophet Isaiah?

Jesus himself was the light and shined his light on life, showing us finally how to live in right relationship with God and others...the way God intended since the beginning of time. But we humans still couldn’t get it right. Because of our self centeredness and selfishness, we continually broke our covenant with God which demanded punishment. It was then that Jesus offered his own life as a sacrifice for

⁵ Isaiah 9:2

⁶ Isaiah 11:1

⁷ Isaiah 7:14

⁸ John 1:1-9

⁹ Luke 2:52

¹⁰ John 8:12

all, ending all sacrifices, so that we could experience God's forgiveness, become the righteousness of God, and be in right fellowship with God once again.

And through his death, Jesus planted his light in our hearts, through the gift of his Holy Spirit, that we might be transformed each day more and more into Jesus' image. At the very end of the Bible in the Book of Revelation, John wrote about the new heaven and new earth and the holy city that God would prepare one day when Jesus returns in his glory and resurrects the dead.

In this city, "No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. **4** They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. **5** There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever."¹¹

So John the Baptist was a witness testifying to the light of Jesus.

Now that we have that under our belts, let's get back to see how Zechariah responds to the fulfillment of Gabriel's promise about John's birth. Notice that it had been eight whole days since their baby was born and Zechariah was still dumbfounded, unable to speak. The story tells us that their neighbors and relatives shared in Elizabeth's joy. But what about Zechariah?

It was not until the eighth day when they were in the temple to present their son for circumcision when they named him. Naming a child was a very big deal. It was usually the roll of the father and the name had some significance at the time of their birth. This was unlike today, when we choose names long before a child is born.

Elizabeth broke from tradition and named their son John, the name which Gabriel had told Zechariah. John is derived from the Hebrew Johanan, which means God is gracious. Or in other terms, God had been gracious to Elizabeth by granting her a son and in her own words, "had taken away her disgrace from among her people." The scripture tell us how they believed that God had shown her tender mercy or compassion.

It seemed that Elizabeth could barely contain herself as she blurted out a name that meant so much to her. John. When her community of faith challenged her that it didn't fall within tradition, Zechariah confirmed his wife's words. He scribbled on a waxen tablet, "His name is John."

Immediately, his mouth was opened and he began praising God.

Again, awe leads to wonder, and wonder brings us to worship a powerful and awesome God!

The scripture says that people were filled with awe and wondered what it all meant.

¹¹ Revelation 22:1-5

The Greek word for awe is *pantas phobos*. It literally means “great fear or fright.” This is the same word that Luke later used to describe the response of the shepherds in the Judea countryside whom the angels greet the night of Jesus’ birth.

But notice that a fear of God didn’t paralyze Zechariah. It lead him to wonder, which unleashed him to praise God. Kind of how the writer of “How Great Thou Art” was not paralyzed by fear by the fierce power of the thunderstorm. In stead, it unleashed his words of praise God for God’s awesome work and power.

When was the last time you witnessed God’s awesome hand in such a way that it moved you to praise God? If it has been a while, what would it take to give ourselves permission to be amazed by God this Christmas?

For Zechariah this was a huge breakthrough. Remember God had given people no word for several hundred years. And now God gave him a prophesy about his son, that John would be a prophet of the Most High God who would go on before Jesus to prepare the way for him. To shine God’s hope on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide their feet into the path of peace.

Could you imagine what Good News this would be to the people of the Ukraine, Israel, and Palestine today? That God would guide their feet into the path of peace! Come Lord Jesus, Come! Bring it!

The last thing that we will focus on this morning was the community’s response to what they witnessed in Zechariah and Elizabeth.

First, they listened to what God had done for these two faithful people.

Second they must have confessed their misgivings about Elizabeth’s infertility and came to the conclusion that she had done nothing wrong.

Third, they shared her joy. The Greek word for joy used here is *sugchairō*. It means to rejoice with, to empathize with, or to congratulate.

Fourth, they were filled with God’s holy fear or a fresh awareness of God’s mighty power.

And finally fifth, they shared the Good News with other people so that word of John’s miraculous birth spread around the Judea countryside.

We’ve had the opportunity these last three weeks to hear from people and how they are holding weariness and rejoicing in tension. Thank you for sharing your stories!

One of the ways that we hold weariness and rejoicing in tension is to be open to being amazed again by God in a way that causes us to wonder which then leads us to praise. To get into our big kid pajamas, put some hot cocoa in a mug, and drive around the neighborhoods to look at the Christmas lights. And say “Oooh! Lights!” And enter in the season with the wonder of a child once again.

Whatever it is. May we burst forth from our weary bondage and proclaim with the saints, “Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee. How great Thou art! How great Thou art!” Amen.