

*The Dawn Breaking Upon Us*

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Sermon for North-Prospect United Church of Christ

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*Text:* Luke 1:68-79

Introduction – These are the words of Zechariah, after Elizabeth gives birth and the child is named John.

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

*Anthem*

*Exercise*

I have an exercise that I would like you all to do with me. We'll take just a couple of minutes to do this now. I want you to think of the names that you ascribe to Jesus, and write them down on your bulletins. This is a free-writing, stream of consciousness exercise, so there are no right answers. To get your mind going, let me offer the example of the lyrics of a song by Michael W. Smith, recorded in the 80s by Amy Grant. The lyrics are simply a short list of names:

Emmanuel, Emmanuel  
Wonderful counselor  
Lord of life, Lord of all  
He's the Prince of Peace  
Mighty God, holy one  
Emmanuel, Emmanuel.

*Prayer*

*Sermon*

Having asked you all to do this exercise, perhaps I should share with you my list. I did have much more time to work on it than you all have, and I had the advantage of having a Bible and a hymnal in front of me when I did it. Thus, in the order I wrote them:  
Savior, redeemer, messiah, Christ, teacher, brother, leader, inspiration, friend, Emmanuel, Prince of Peace, Healer, King, Guide, Alpha and Omega, Servant, the way the truth and the life, the Word made flesh, Dawn, Hope, Bread of Life, Anointed One, Son of God, Light of the World.

Any others that you'd like to include?

Now, why did I ask you to do this? Well, it's "Reign of Christ" Sunday, formerly known as Christ the King Sunday. It's the last Sunday of the liturgical year, an obscure little fact probably known only to those preparing worship services for today. Next week our liturgical cycle starts over again with the first week of Advent, and we'll spend several weeks anticipating the coming of the baby Jesus and the beginning of the Jesus story. This week is a bit different. We're looking back over the cycle, remembering and celebrating Jesus' life, death and resurrection. In that sense, we're doing what I hope many of us did with family and friends this past Thursday: giving thanks for the blessings in our lives. This morning we're giving thanks for the blessings of Jesus Christ in our lives. Certainly this giving thanks is at the core of our reading today: Zechariah and Elizabeth were profoundly blessed by the birth of John, who would grow up to be John the Baptist. Zechariah is making an offering of praise to God for the gift of John. But of course there's more to Zechariah's words, and there's more to our worship theme today. We're thinking about the Reign of Christ – what Jesus ushered in, what we continue to build in the world as the Body of Christ; what total transformation of our existence is yet to come. In addition to expressing gratitude for his family's good fortune, Zechariah is expressing gratitude for the blessings his people will receive with Jesus' arrival. Zechariah in today's reading is looking at the present, and looking forward. In a song of Thanksgiving for the birth of his son, John, he looks forward to Jesus, and who Jesus will be. The most high. And the dawn. Zechariah says Jesus is a mighty savior. The NRSV commentators tell us that this phrase, mighty savior, might be better translated "a horn of salvation." Think about the drama of that appellation. Jesus – the horn of salvation. Two meanings are evoked by this vibrant phrase: Zechariah says who Jesus will be and indicates that God's promises will be fulfilled in Jesus. This is the promise spoken of in the Psalms and in Malachi, and in other Hebrew Scriptures. Psalm 18 verse 2 reads, "The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold," and numerous other psalms refer to salvific horns. The horn of salvation is not the only major allusion to Hebrew Scriptures – I invite you to sit down with an annotated Bible and pour through Zechariah's hymn of praise. Fred Craddock, in his commentary on Luke, makes another point about this passage: it is a poem, it is in its form, liturgical, possibly composed in early Christian communities, and drawing on the form and content of Jewish tradition. He says, "Reading chapters one and two must have been much like entering a sanctuary and finding oneself familiar with the words, the stories, the hymns, even the place." (*Luke: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, p. 23) The use of existing images and prophecies to tell about the future savior tells those who hear Zechariah's words that Jesus is a new phenomenon and a fulfillment of many old promises.

I want to change the course of our thoughts for a moment, by looking at another passage from Luke, one also suggested for today, Reign of Christ Sunday, by the Revised Common Lectionary. It is from Luke 23. Jesus is on the cross, and one of the criminals being crucified next to him asks, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). Zechariah speaks of a savior and a redeemer, the fulfiller of promises. There is nothing but hope for the future in his words. We come to the end of Jesus' earthly life, and the human expectations for the horn of salvation have seemingly not been met. Zechariah the priest has spoke of a savior, and here, a lowly criminal says to the man dying next to him, remember me when you come into your kingdom. There is a tension, I think, in all the Gospels, between the expectations for Jesus' earthly triumph and kingship and expectations for the inbreaking of the reign of the Divine. The conflict between the earthly and the heavenly is ever present in my faith

even now. What about you? As Christians, we name Jesus, a man crucified, as our savior. We name Jesus, a baby in a manger, our King. Zechariah's praise hymn and the words of the criminal offer contrasting interpretations of the story and meaning of Jesus. It is Reign of Christ Sunday. Jesus was a baby; Jesus was crucified; Jesus is a risen savior. Jesus was a healer; Jesus was a teacher; Jesus is the Prince of Peace. Jesus was a peasant who was mockingly called a king, died on a cross, rose on the third day. It is Reign of Christ Sunday, and we hold all these things together in our vision of Christ. Today, we celebrate the ways Jesus Christ is our sovereign. We look back on Jesus' life, we search for signs of the Divine reign in our lives now, and we wait and hope for a final and definitive coming of the reign of God. We look not only heavenward for the realm of God and Christ, but we look also for a transformed earthly world. As Zechariah held past, present, and future together in his song of praise, we hold past, present, and future together in our vision of Christ's reign.

Now, I wonder if you have the sense that I'm spinning plates? Have you ever seen someone at a talent show spinning plates on sticks, getting the first going, adding a second, then a third, and so on till some start to fall and break? As I see it, I've got two plates going so far – first, Zechariah with his thanksgivings for blessings received, and prophecy of who Jesus would be; second, Jesus in his many facets, including peasant and rabbi, earthly and heavenly sovereign. I'm only going to add one more plate, and I'll only try to spin it for a minute, because I don't want my first two plates to fall and break.

The third plate, as it were, is the plate of the meanings of kingship. If the one we name as King is an unlikely monarch, then Christ's reign is even more unlikely. His crown was one of thorns, not jewels. His dominion is not one marked by wealth and hierarchy. All have equal status in Christ's domain; he welcomes all and treats each person with equal concern and love. The attributes of this sovereign are vulnerability and courage, compassion and wisdom, and love. Jesus Christ never set himself above his people, but lived among us and as one of us. The power of this ruler is not the power of a dictator but the power of a teacher and a companion. Carter Heyward, a theologian at Episcopal Divinity School here in Cambridge, speaks of the power of Christ and the power of the Divine as power in mutual relation, power with and power within (Ch. 3, *Saving Jesus*). The implications of all of this for us are vast – as we work to build the reign of Christ in our world, we aren't working toward triumph and power over; we are working toward justice, and peace, and power with. Earlier I said that when Jesus died, the expectations that Zechariah had for this human being and earthly king did not seem to have been met. But perhaps they had – recall that the final verse of Zechariah prophesied that Jesus would “guide our feet into the way of peace.” And the ministry and teachings of Jesus did indeed guide our feet into the way of peace. The expectations for the coming Savior, spoken of by Zechariah and the writers of Hebrew Scriptures, were fulfilled, in unexpected ways.

Christians believe that the Christ story did not end when Jesus died, nor when he rose, nor when he left the disciples to ascend to heaven. The story goes on in our world even today, even now. And many Christians look forward to an eschatological climax – a definitive inbreaking of the reign of God, a completion of the story. So, on this Reign of Christ Sunday, I invite you not only to look back on Jesus' life, nor just to think of the ways Christ reigns in your heart now, but also to envision the future. What are your expectations for the reign of Christ? This is an invitation to think about the personhood of Jesus and the sovereignty of Christ. I hope that I've offered you a starting point in the naming exercise. Zechariah named Jesus Christ Most High, the horn of salvation, and the dawn. What are your names for Christ and what is your vision of Christ's reign?

Amen.