

“A Song of Light and Salvation”
Malachi 4:1-2
Luke 1:67-79
Rev. David Hutchinson
Sunday, December 15, 2019

For the past two weeks we have been focusing on SONGS.

We continue that theme this week, with one more song...

By “songs” I mean well known LYRICAL passages from the Old Testament - - that are revised and used by the New Testament - - to tell the story of Jesus. These Biblical “songs” might seem more like poems to us - - because there are not musical notations in the Biblical texts. But they’re called “songs” by commentators - - and some may have been set to music.

Last week’s song, was Mary’s song. / Mary the mother of Jesus has probably the most famous biblical song of Christmas, sometimes called the “Magnificat”. And YET - - her song is very similar to a much more ancient Old Testament song of Hannah - - as we discussed last week.

The Magnificat is found in Luke chapter one. / It is in a larger section of the first chapter of Luke - - about the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth. So the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth is the scene. / In this scene BOTH Elizabeth AND Mary have a song. / Like a scene from a 1950s Christmas musical.

AND - - like in a musical - - the next scene has ANOTHER song.

TODAY we will focus on that NEXT scene in Luke, chapter one...the song of Zechariah. / Zechariah who was the FATHER of JOHN the Baptist, who announced Jesus. / SO - - Zechariah was that father - - of the forerunner - - of Jesus.

But though his son is the forerunner - - he sings HIS song AFTER Mary - - and before the BIRTH of Jesus.

Zechariah's song uses the image of LIGHT.

One of the questions that comes up when we consider Zachariah's song is whether light is a GOOD thing or a BAD thing... HOW - - is light both frightening - - and also a thing of MERCY?

Nancy and I sometimes have a similar discussion regarding the window shades and lights in the house. / Is dim lighting comforting - - or romantic - - or does it make it difficult to see? / And is bright light joyous - - or harsh?

Do you know what I mean?

Think of that classic TV animated special: "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer"

We know the story - - right?

IF we know the story - - it's because we know what? The SONG!

It is a story - - based on a song.

Rudolph is a reindeer - - born - - with a nose that LIGHTS UP.

And the question is: is that good or bad?

At first his BRIGHT nose seems bad: people make fun of him.

Rudolph doesn't fit in - - because of this - - LIGHT.

BUT - - when DISASTER strikes - - everything gets turned around.

His bad bright nose - - becomes the very thing that - - saves the day.

This light - - saves Christmas.

Well - - a similar thing is going on with Malachi the Old Testament prophet.

Malachi is the LAST book of the Old Testament. / The prophecies of Malachi come very LATE in the history of Israel. / This is AFTER the exile, and after the people have returned to their home and Jerusalem. This is even AFTER they have started rebuilding the Temple and the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

So they have FINALLY returned home.

But - - is that a good thing - - or a bad thing?

Well - - the rebuilding efforts are more difficult than some had imagined. / And the people are in disagreement now about HOW to be good Jews. / And into that disagreement - - steps Jesus - - a few centuries later.

Malachi uses the image of LIGHT and a FIRE.

Malachi asks us to consider whether LIGHT is a good thing or a bad thing.

Specifically: does the light of the fire PURIFY - - or BURN us up - - or HEAL?

Answer: it depends.

It depends on your relationship with God.

According to Malachi, if you are an evildoer - - the fire is judgment and burns.

But if you fear God - - it is like a SUNRISE - - that HEALS.

The phrase from Malachi is: "healing in its WINGS"

How can a LIGHT have WINGS you might ask?

THE WINGS are like the tongues of FIRE.

Or the BEAMS of the SUN.

Zechariah - - remembers this ancient song about the SUN when his SON is born.

And Zechariah knows - - that JESUS is just around the corner too.

The birth of FIRST John the Baptist - - and THEN JESUS - - are like a sunrise.

Zechariah sings of a CHILD that will prepare for a SUNRISE.

John - - will prepare for Jesus.

And - - according to Zechariah - - it will be like the light of the SUN!

For Zechariah, the “sun of righteousness” that Malachi sang about - - is HERE!

AND - - that is either a very GOOD thing - - or a BAD thing - - depending on your relationship with God. / One thing is for SURE though - - EVERYTHING gets TURNED on its HEAD by this LIGHT.

The evildoers - - fail.

The meek - - are HEALED.

The very LIGHT that CAN seem HARSH to some - - SAVES the DAY!

People in Malachi’s day expected a DAY of judgment.

But Malachi held out the hope of a day of HEALING.

By referring to this HOPE - - Zechariah - - COMBINES the TWO in Jesus.

There will be BOTH - - JUDGMENT of the EVIL in the world...

AND - - WINGS of HEALING - - and MERCY.

Things that SEEMED BAD - - - will bring GOOD!

Like the REVERSALS in the FAMOUS Christmas stories - - “It’s a Wonderful Life” - - and Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol” - - the Scrooges of the world - - AND the George Baileys - - are ALL in for a SURPRISE!

The way that Zechariah uses Malachi’s image of LIGHT - - here in Luke’s gospel - - reminds me of the STAR that the Magi followed in Matthew’s gospel.

The BABY Jesus - - is NOT just IN the LIGHT - - Jesus IS the LIGHT.

A poem called, “The Christmas Star” - - makes the SAME connection.

The poem begins:

“It was winter.

The wind blew from the plain.

And the infant was cold.

In the cave - - in the slope of a hill.

Then the poem describes the star the Magi followed:

Nearby - - unseen until then - -

more humble than an oil-lamp - - in a hut’s window - -

A STAR - - - glimmered - -

Over the road to Bethlehem.

It BLAZED like a haystack,

Apart from heaven and God.

Like a reflection from ARSON.

Like a farmstead, or a threshing floor in flames.

It towered like a burning rick of hay or straw...

...in the midst of a universe - - alarmed - -

by this new STAR.

A growing glow - - red above the star - -

was portending something

AND - - three astrologers hastened - -

To the call - - of that unprecedented light.

Later on the poem connects - - that STAR - - and the DAWN - - and Jesus:

Day was breaking.

The DAWN - - swept the last stars, bits of ashes - - from the sky.

Mary allowed ONLY the Magi - - to enter the cleft of rock.

He slept - - all luminous - - in the oak manger.

Like a MOONBEAM - - in the hollow if a tree.

Instead of sheepskin - -

He was warmed by the lips of a donkey - - and the nostrils of an ox.

They stood in the shadow.

Suddenly - - in the dark - - one touched another - -

To move him a bit to the left of the manger...

And the other TURNED from the threshold like a guest,

The Christmas STAR - - was looking at the MAIDEN.

And SO - - the poem ends with that.

A BEAUTIFUL image - - for the baby Jesus - - looking at mother Mary.

But I am left with QUESTIONS from EARLIER in the poem.

HOW do WE take in this LIGHT?

What might it mean - - for OUR lives?

How might it SHINE - - in OUR world?

Boris Pasternak who wrote the poem - - puts it THIS way in the poem - - when considering the impact of the star - - on those who looked up and saw it in the sky:

Listen...

“Everything that was to COME LATER...
SPRANG up far off - - like a strange vision.
All the thoughts of the ages...
All the dreams... all the worlds to come...
All the future of galleries and museums...
All pranks and fairies...
All works of magicians...
All fir trees on earth...
All dreams of children...
All the tremor of lighted candles...
All the splendor of colored tinsel.

My hope for us - - as we think about the words of this more contemporary poem,
IS - - that we would find a way - - to let the LIGHT of this season - - into our lives.

Amen.