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One of the tragedies of our world is the continuing impression that the miracle of Christmas was that Mary was *"found to be with child"* at the start of Advent, and 25 days later gave birth to baby Jesus! I've given up trying to change this misconception (excuse the pun!).

This year, our journey through Advent is through the songs sung by the main characters, Zechariah, Mary & Elisabeth, The Angelic Choir, The Shepherds, and Simeon & Anna. Each of their songs are absolutely awesome! To be able to spontaneously compose something so profound, so heartfelt and personal, has to come from a deeper relationship with the One about whom they sing with such gusto! Their songs capture what Lloyd Stillely describes as *the sheer explosive impact of the birth of a baby boy, not only upon their time, but upon all times*. These are songs of comfort and of challenge, songs of quiet peace and of global upheaval, and songs that wrap mind and heart around the most important moment in the history of the world. Over the next four Sundays, we shall consider four original compositions that capture the meaning of the greatest miracle of all, not the mis-imagined miracle that Jesus was born 25 days after His conception, but rather that Jesus left Heaven on God's very special mission to surrender to death on the Cross, and defeat death through His resurrection. These are not "pop songs" with limited shelf life; over 2000 years these have inspired hymn writers and are still read and sung. We shall go behind the scenes with each songwriter and feel the revolution they set to song.

The birth and death of Jesus were times of great emotional stress. Jesus snuck into the world, unknown to anyone (except family and a band of shepherds), until a gaggle of astronomers blurted out to the megalomaniac Herod, *Where is the King of the Jews? We have come to worship Him?*, and the cat was out of the bag.

Luke opens his narrative with Zechariah, our first singer-songwriter, a priest whose turn had come to serve in the Temple. In the rota of serving

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priests, there were three selected by lot, for the offering of incense, **1)** to remove the ashes of the former service; **2)** to bring in and place on the golden altar, the pan filled with hot burning coals taken from the altar of burnt offering; and **3)** to sprinkle incense on the hot coals; and, while the smoke ascended, intercessions for the people were made. This was the most distinguished part of the service, and **this** lot fell to Zechariah at this time.

Both Zechariah and his wife Elisabeth were of noble priestly lineage, that could be traced. To marry the daughter of a priest was a rare and wonderful thing; she would better understand the demands of the priesthood. As many congratulated them on their wedding day, special blessings would have been pronounced: *"May God be pleased to give you many children"*, and as was Jewish custom of the day, it would have been said, *"And may He send the Messiah through you to set His people free."*

For 50-60 years they would have yearned for children, but now, *"well advanced in years"*, this desire had faded.

Zechariah faithfully performed his duties as priest. Imagine his joy when the lot was drawn and his name came up to offer incense to God. *God remembers me to grant me this honour! Now Elisabeth would wear a smile when she went shopping and visited family and friends.*

She was in for a shock when Zechariah returned home, unable to speak. Imagine his painstaking effort to explain his encounter with the Angel in the Holy of Holies. Without the aid of Stephen Hawkins' speech synthesiser, how do you convey the Angel's joyous message, that God is about to answer their prayer of a lifetime. They would have a son, a very special boy, with a role to play in world history as the long-foretold forerunner to the Messiah, who would be Jesus! Convey he did, Elisabeth trusted him, and it wasn't long before she conceived!

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For nine months, Zechariah had to contain the joy of answered prayer to himself, unable even to convey his great joy to Mary when she visited for three months.

Eight days after their baby's birth, while the family and Elisabeth discussed the boy's name, when asked, Zechariah obeyed the Angel's instruction and declared the boy be named John. Instantly his ability to speak was restored, and the first thing he did was to praise God!

Unable to openly praise to God for nine months, praise gushed from the heart and mouth of this priest, each line loaded with deep truth about one overwhelming reality: God has at long last come! Faith will become sight. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah pours out from his heart a joyous melody about the purpose and meaning of *God in the flesh, dwelling among men*.

Zechariah sings of God's great purpose to save us, declaring four theological Truths:

1. The price to free us is paid

v. 68: "He has visited and provided redemption for His people." God has moved closer to us, to rescue us at a high price, at extreme cost to Himself, to free us from slavery to sin, and the penalty of death.

2. The power to accomplish our salvation, is His

v. 69. "He has raised up a horn of salvation for us." The horn of an animal is the symbol of its strength, its brute power. To say that God has raised up a horn of salvation for us means, that we have a Mighty Saviour who has the power to finish what He started.

3. The victory over our enemies is assured

v. 71. "He has raised up . . . salvation from our enemies and from the clutches of those who hate us" (see also v. 74). Zechariah's focus is practical **and** spiritual: God will deliver His people from any tyrant, importantly, God will deliver us from the worst enemies: sin, death

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and demonic power. This Heavenly Hero will have no trouble conquering these enemies for us.

4. The erasing of all offences is absolutely certain

v. 77. "To give His people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins." God did not visit this planet simply to see how we were doing. He came because we were in trouble and he came to deliver us out of trouble. That's what Christmas is all about.

Zechariah's song contains three important themes:

a) Only God can fulfil the promises He made

"He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets in ancient times" (v. 70), remembering "His holy covenant . . . that He swore to our father Abraham." (v. 72-73). Zechariah just can't stop glorying in God, who keeps His promises. This is what makes God distinct from all other contenders: God binds Himself to promises He has made. There are no less than 456 signs in the OT to properly identify the Messiah. Guess who is fulfilling them to this day! The One and only Son of the Living God, Jesus Christ. God does what He says, in His time and His way, for His glory and our good. Praise His Name!

b) Only God can transform lives

Moved by God's Spirit, Zechariah tells us what this Messiah brings to those who trust and follow Him. There will be **spiritual transformation, v. 74: "to serve Him"**, and **emotional transformation, v. 74: "to serve Him without fear."** And there will be **behavioural transformation, v. 75: "In holiness and righteousness in His presence all our days."**

What does this "transformation" look like practically?

- i. we who were lost in sin, might be lifted up into the service of God.
- ii. we who served another master, now serve God our Creator.

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- iii. we who fear God might be reconciled to Him to enjoy a joyous relationship.
- iv. we who once could not please God, might be pleasing to Him forever.

The first theme running through Zechariah's song is that **Only God can fulfil the promises He made**, the second theme is, **Only God can transform lives**. The third theme running through his song is,

c) Only God can deliver unmatched impact

Zechariah's joyous solo closes with one final burst of praise, in which he uses three very picturesque phrases to help us feel the impact of God's coming.

- i. v. 78: *"The Dawn from on high will visit us."* Finally, the sun has broken the horizon on a dark world!
- ii. v. 79a: *"To shine on those who live in darkness and the shadow of death."* This pictures someone on death row, hopeless, pining away, beyond all human rescue. Then suddenly, light and freedom!
- iii. v. 79b: *"To guide our feet into the way of peace."*
This is the difference that Jesus Christ makes. - shadows flee, you are released from prison of this futile life, forever, and when He comes in, our feet walk the path of peace with God.
That is the unmatched impact of Jesus Christ!

In the midst of the old man's song, are two tender verses (76 & 77). Holding his son, the miracle child in his arms, he contemplated the seismic shift that was taking place in his lifetime: this little life will prepare the way for the Saviour Lord, and he will tell his people how to find salvation through the forgiveness of sins, forgiveness of not living life God's way. God's promise made thousands of years earlier, was going to

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be fulfilled in and through this little life, and Zechariah just **had** to sing with joy!

This is the story of Christmas: God enters quietly into a chaotic world, in the person of Jesus Christ. Having fulfilled His mission of breaking the barrier of death, the Son of God now knocks at the door of your heart, drums His thoughts in your mind, and wants to synchronise His heartbeat with yours! Can you be still, and hear the sound of His presence, beckoning you into a deeper relationship with Him?

Our closing hymn is another carol of lament, *How silently, how silently, The wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts, The blessings of His heaven. No ear may hear His coming, But in this world of sin, Where meek souls will receive Him still, The dear Christ enters in.* **Let's pray!**