

“Zechariah’s Song: Singing in the New Day”

Sermon by Rev. Dr. John M. Best to the First Presbyterian Church of Battle Creek

Luke 1:57-79

December 6, 2020

Again, I want to thank the Session for the invitation to preach during this season of Advent.

I’ve entitled this sermon series, *“Songs of the Season.”*

Music is so much a part of our Advent and Christmas season.

We pull out our Christmas music and play it at home

while decorating our homes,

while writing annual letters and Christmas card,

while wrapping gifts, baking and cooking.

But I won’t be talking about *“chestnuts roasting over an open fire,”*

or how a kid *“saw mama kiss’in Santa Claus,”*

or that *“grandma got run over by a reindeer!”*

I want to explore with you the original songs the gospel writer Luke shared with us.

When Zechariah heard the angel’s message that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son, he did not believe it. Not at her age. And he was struck dumb.

For nine months he watched and listened in speechless silence.

Then, his son was born,

and on the eighth day at John’s circumcision Zechariah’s voice was restored.

There is no disbelief this time.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah sang of God’s deliverance being on the way.

Deliverance which was not yet evident, **but he breaks into song anyway,**

singing as one who believes without seeing.

In 1973, **Michel Perry** set Zechariah’s words to **Merle’s Tune**, in the new Presbyterian hymnal.

“Blest be the God of Israel, who comes to set us free,

who visits and redeems us, who grants us liberty.”¹

Or perhaps more familiar, **James Quinn’s** 1969 version set to an English Tune arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams.

“Blest be the God of Israel, the ever living Lord.

You come in power to save Your own, Your people Israel.”²

Without seeing it, and with some time to contemplate

Zechariah believed the promised new day God promised was dawning.

That it was coming into the world through Mary’s child.

That in some way, he and Elizabeth and their son John would pave the way.

As we too, today are called to do.

WILL WE SING OUR WAY INTO THE NEW DAY OF GOD’S PROMISE.

While it is still emerging on the horizon, before the rising sun?

Will we sing our way into the new day?

Will we join God in allowing God to work through us to make it so?

Do you remember **Samantha Smith**?

Samantha was a 10 year old school girl in Maine in 1982,

when Ronald Reagan was just elected president.
She had the audacity to write a letter to Mikhail Gorbachev urging peace.
Later Gorbachev invited Samantha to visit the Soviet Union,
She became a goodwill ambassador between the USA & the then U.S.S.R. ³
Me, I was two years old when the Soviets launched the first satellite, Sputnik,
Setting off a race in space and arms build up.
I was five years old when the Iron Curtain went up in 1960.
In 1982 when Samantha sent her letter, I was a seminary student
and could not imagine life without a Cold War.
But Samantha could! She dared to sing of a new day of peace.
With all that's going on in the world today, dare we to sing of a new day dawning?

I wonder if the people of South Africa believed that Law of Apartheid would end?

And that the transition to a Black president would be so peaceful?
There were those who dared to sing of that new day.
Arch Bishop Desmond Tuto, and the authors of the Belhar Confession
Dirke Schmidt and Roland Boteman
and those who voted at a church meeting to affirm it.
They affirmed unity as an essential to the faith.⁴
They challenged the oppression encased in law and blessed by church theology.
They sang Zechariah's hope of peace through justice before it emerged.

Dare we sing in the new day of God's deliverance

for those held down by the status quo,
a status quo which keeps the people already privileged, happy?

I wonder if the people in the Middle East can envision an Israel without walls?

Without a tiered level of citizenship for Jew, for Palestinian Christian, and Muslim.
A pipe dream, yet there are those who sing Zechariah's song,
and live as though God's promised blessing is already well on the way.

Rev. Elias Jabbour built a house of hope there.

is a force for reconciliation in that land,
and is a powerful witness of peace in a land of so much strife.
Singing in the New Day.

Dare we sing in the New Day of God's redemption?

I wonder if people with Cancer or Covid can see themselves whole, disease free again.

Chip Duryea, an elder of the Montauk Church and business leader in the community,
was diagnosed with rectal cancer my last year as pastor there.

He subscribed to a technique of visualization

of visualizing the battle like armies lined up for battle,
and seeing with one's mind's eye the battle being waged and won.

I have a book entitled, *"You Can't Afford a Negative Thought"*

Chip did not allow himself any negative thought.

Even while he was being treated, living with a colostomy bag

he turned his disease challenge into a ministry.

He reached out to others living with cancer, and started a support group,

He made himself available to them by phone to encourage them.

That was 17 years ago...and he sings on.
Dare we turn our own nightmare into a ministry, and sing in a new day for others?

Like most of us, Zechariah at first disbelieved.

But he found his voice once again at his son's circumcision and filled with the Holy Spirit
he sang his song
He knew in the bottom of his heart, yes, it is come. It is now!
Without seeing it, he sang praising God for the new day God promised was dawning.

*"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel
For he has looked favorably on his people
And redeemed them." (Luke 1:68)*

WILL WE SING OUR WAY INTO THAT NEW DAY?

I know, it's not a good year for singing. We can't even worship together in one place.
But while it's still dark, before the light of dawn begins to emerge, before the sun rises,
will we believe our way, celebrate our way, if not sing our way into the new day?

*"On those who sit in darkness the sun begins to rise,
The dawning of forgiveness upon the sinner's eyes.
God guides the feet pilgrims along the paths of peace.
O bless our God and Savior with songs that never cease." (GTG #109, v.3)*

Footnotes:

¹ Glory to God, Westminster/John Knox Press, © 2013, #109.

² Presbyterian Hymnal, Westminster/John Knox Press ©1990 #601

³Wikipedia: In November 1982, when Smith was 10 years old, she wrote to [Soviet leader Yuri Andropov](#), seeking to understand why the [relations between the Soviet Union and the United States](#) were so tense:

Dear Mr. Andropov,

My name is Samantha Smith. I am 10 years old. Congratulations on your new job. I have been worrying about Russia and the United States getting into a nuclear war. Are you going to vote to have a war or not? If you aren't please tell me how you are going to help to not have a war. This question you do not have to answer, but I would like it if you would. Why do you want to conquer the world or at least our country? God made the world for us to share and take care of. Not to fight over or have one group of people own it all. Please lets do what he wanted and have everybody be happy too.

Samantha Smith^[10]

Her letter was published in the Soviet newspaper [Pravda](#).^[11] Smith was happy to discover that her letter had been published; however, she had not received a reply. She then sent a letter to the Soviet Union's Ambassador to the United States asking if Andropov intended to respond.^[12] On April 26, 1983, she received a response from Andropov:

Dear Samantha,

I received your letter, which is like many others that have reached me recently from your country and from other countries around the world.

It seems to me – I can tell by your letter – that you are a courageous and honest girl, resembling [Becky](#), the friend of [Tom Sawyer](#) in the famous book of your compatriot [Mark Twain](#). This book is well known and loved in our country by all boys and girls.

You write that you are anxious about whether there will be a nuclear war between our two countries. And you ask are we doing anything so that war will not break out.

Your question is the most important of those that every thinking man can pose. I will reply to you seriously and honestly.

Yes, Samantha, we in the Soviet Union are trying to do everything so that there will not be war on Earth. This is what every Soviet man wants. This is what the great founder of our state, [Vladimir Lenin](#), taught us.

Soviet people well know what a terrible thing war is. Forty-two years ago, [Nazi Germany](#), which strove for supremacy over the whole world, [attacked our country](#), burned and destroyed many thousands of our towns and villages, killed millions of Soviet men, women and children.

In that war, which ended with our victory, we were in [alliance with the United States](#): together we fought for the liberation of many people from the Nazi invaders. I hope that you know about this from your history lessons in school. And today we want very much to live in peace, to trade and cooperate with all our neighbors on this earth — with those far away and those near by. And certainly with such a great country as the United States of America.

In America and in our country there are nuclear weapons — terrible weapons that can kill millions of people in an instant. But we do not want them to be ever used. That's precisely why the Soviet Union solemnly declared throughout the entire world that never will it [use nuclear weapons first](#) against any country. In general we propose to discontinue further production of them and to proceed to the [abolition of all the stockpiles](#) on Earth.

It seems to me that this is a sufficient answer to your second question: 'Why do you want to wage war against the whole world or at least the United States?' We want nothing of the kind. No one in our country—neither workers, peasants, writers nor doctors, neither grown-ups nor children, nor members of the government—want either a big or 'little' war.

We want peace — there is something that we are occupied with: growing wheat, building and inventing, writing books and flying into space. We want peace for ourselves and for all peoples of the planet. For our children and for you, Samantha.

I invite you, if your parents will let you, to come to our country, the best time being this summer. You will find out about our country, meet with your contemporaries, visit an international children's camp – [Artek](#) – on the sea. And see for yourself: in the Soviet Union, everyone is for peace and friendship among peoples.

Thank you for your letter. I wish you all the best in your young life.

Y. Andropov^{[13][14]}



Samantha Smith (center) visiting the USSR upon the invitation of General Secretary of the Central Committee of CPSU Yuri Andropov in all-Union Artek pioneer camp

⁴ Book of Confessions, Study Edition, Westminster/John Knox Press © 2017 pp 383-409