The Songs of Christmas
An Advent Bible Study

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Abiding Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church
Elgin, Illinois

December 2007
Benedictus: The Song of Zechariah

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 and has redeemed his people.
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 fathers
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.” (Luke 1:67-79, NIV)
1. Look at Luke 1:5-25, 57-66, and describe who Zechariah was and the circumstances surrounding this song.

2. Zechariah only used two sentences in his twelve-verse song. What is the main topic of the first sentence (vv. 68-75)? the second sentence (v. 76-79)?

3. “Praise be to the Lord” means, “Let everyone speak well of God in the way which he deserves.” What reason does Zechariah give for praising God?

4. Why does Zechariah speak in the past tense?

5. How does verse 69 make it clear that Zechariah is not referring to his own son?

6. How does verse 70 teach the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures?

7. Who are “our enemies” and “all who hate us” (v. 71)? Cf. v. 77, Colossians 2:15, 1 John 5:4-5, and Romans 6:6

8. What twofold purpose does Zechariah give in verse 72 for God’s redeeming his people?


10. What are the two parts of God’s covenant (v. 74), and how are they connected? Cf. 1 John 4:18, Psalm 118:6, Isaiah 12:2, and Isaiah 41:10-11
11. The word for “serve” in verse 74 implies religious service, a life lived as worship to God. A different word for “serve” means the unpaid, required service that a slave offers his master. Explain the difference. Which does God want from us?

12. How can Zechariah say that we serve God “in righteousness and holiness”?

13. John would be like an ancient herald, whose task was to alert the towns that the king would soon arrive, so that everything would be put in order and nothing would interrupt the king’s travels. However, how was John’s role even more than that (v. 77)?

14. According to verse 77, how alone does salvation come?

15. According to verse 78, why are sins forgiven?

16. Who or what is the “rising sun [that] will come to us from heaven” (v. 78-79)?

17. Who are “those living in darkness and in the shadow of death” (v. 79)?

18. Agree or disagree: Even though the last four verses are about Zechariah’s son John, the focus is still primarily on Jesus.

19. Why is Zechariah’s song an appropriate one for Advent?
One author lists the following Old Testament References in Zechariah’s song:\(^1\):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zechariah’s Song</th>
<th>The Old Testament</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V. 68a: “Blessed (be) the Lord, the God of Israel”</td>
<td>Psalm 41:13; 72:18; 106:48 = the conclusion of the Books I, II, and IV of the Hebrew Psalter.</td>
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<tr>
<td>V.68b: “Because he has…brought about redemption for his people.”</td>
<td>Exodus 4:31; Psalm 111:9.</td>
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<td>V.69: “And has raised up a horn,” etc.</td>
<td>Psalm 18:2; 132:17.</td>
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<tr>
<td>V.70: “As he spoke by the mouth of,” etc.</td>
<td>Ezra 1:1; Jeremiah 1:9; Zechariah 8:9.</td>
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<tr>
<td>V.72a: “To deal mercifully with our fathers”</td>
<td>Psalm 25:6; 98:3; 136 (second part of each verse).</td>
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<tr>
<td>V.72b, 73: “And to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to Abraham,” etc.</td>
<td>Genesis 12:2; 17:7; 22:15-18; Exodus 2:24; 2 Samuel 22:51; Psalm 105:6-10; Micah 7:20.</td>
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<tr>
<td>V. 74, 75: “To grant us that we…should serve him,” etc.</td>
<td>Exodus 19:6; Jeremiah 30:9, 10.</td>
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<tr>
<td>V. 76: “And you…will go before,” etc.</td>
<td>Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 3:1. See also Luke 1:17.</td>
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<tr>
<td>V.77: “In order to impart to his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.”</td>
<td>Psalm 103:11,12; Isaiah 1:18; 43:25; 53:5,8,10,12; Jeremiah 31:34b; Micah 4:2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. 78, 79: “Because of the tender compassion of our God, whereby the Rising Sun will visit us...to shine on those who sit in darkness,” etc.</td>
<td>Psalm 107:10; Isaiah 9:1; 42:7; 60:1-3; Malachi 4:2.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Christian Worship includes the Song of Zechariah in hymns 275 and 276. Christian Worship: New Service Settings includes the Song of Zechariah in place of “You are God; We Praise You” during Advent in its service of Morning Praise.

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Can you guess which songwriter wrote this about his Christmas hymn, which is included in our hymnal?

I wondered what fresh approach and contemporary application could be made of that central event in history. Rather than report the event again in the third person, as so many Christmas songs do, I placed myself in spirit at that poor manger bed and reviewed the implications of that visit in my life and future and in that of my fellow human beings. I have struggled, and more so as I grow older, with the incomprehensibility of that event and of my connection with it, and with each commemoration of that miracle becoming more routine, though its impact on God’s heart remains the means of my salvation. I pictured myself at the opposite side of the event from Isaiah and his prophecy, applying the same promise to myself as a late-arriving pilgrim.

Share your thoughts and impressions of that hymn.
And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

to Abraham and his descendants forever,

even as he said to our fathers.” (Luke 1:46-55, NIV)
Magnificat: The Song of Mary

1. Look at Luke 1:26-45, and describe the circumstances surrounding this song.

2. When Mary says, “My soul magnifies the Lord,” is she talking about the song she is singing, something else, or both?

3. Mary does not address God directly in her song. Can we legitimately call this a song of praise? Why or why not?

4. Why do you think Mary says “my soul” and “my spirit” instead of just “I”?

5. What is the significance of Mary calling God “my Savior”?

6. Agree or disagree: Mary earned God’s favor by her humility.

7. When Mary said, “From now on all generations will call me blessed,” was she speaking prophetically or simply by faith in what God had told her?

8. According to verse 49, why will “all generations call [Mary] blessed”?

10. What do we mean when we say, “holy is his name”?

11. What does it mean to fear God (v. 50)?

12. Mary uses the past tense in verses 51-55. To what event(s) is she referring?

13. Are the proud, the rulers, the humble, the hungry, the rich and God’s servant Israel to be taken physically or spiritually? Cf. John 18:36, Romans 14:17, Matthew 5:1-10

14. What does “in their inmost thoughts” add to the description of those who are “proud”?

15. When or how do the role reversals described in these verses happen?

16. What does Mary mean by “remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants”? Does God forget?

17. According to verse 55, upon what is Mary’s faith grounded?

18. In what ways is Mary’s song an ideal model for our worship today?
One author lists the following Old Testament References in Mary’s song:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mary’s Song</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V. 46: “My soul glorifies the Lord”</td>
<td>1 Samuel 2:1; Psalm 34:2,3; Psalm 103:1.</td>
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<tr>
<td>V. 47: “and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”</td>
<td>Psalm 18:46b; Isaiah 61:10</td>
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<td>V. 48a: “for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.”</td>
<td>Psalm 138:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. 49a: “for the Mighty One has done great things for me.”</td>
<td>Psalm 71:19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. 49b: “holy is his name.”</td>
<td>1 Samuel 2:2; Psalm 22:3; Psalm 71:22b; Psalm 89:18; Psalm 99:3; Psalm 103:1b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. 50: “His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation”</td>
<td>Psalm 103:17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. 51a: “He has performed mighty deeds with his arm”</td>
<td>Psalm 44:3; Psalm 77:14-15; Psalm 98:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. 51b: “He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts”</td>
<td>1 Samuel 2:3; 2 Samuel 22:28; Psalm 89:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. 52a: “He has brought down rulers from their thrones”</td>
<td>1 Samuel 2:4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. 52b: “but has lifted up the humble”</td>
<td>1 Samuel 2:4b; 1 Samuel 2:8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. 53a: “He has filled the hungry with good things”</td>
<td>1 Samuel 2:5b; Psalm 103:5; Psalm 107:8-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. 53b: “but he has sent the rich away empty”</td>
<td>1 Samuel 2:5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. 54-55a: “He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever”</td>
<td>Psalm 25:6; Psalm 98:3; Psalm 105:8-11; Psalm 136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. 55b: “even as he said to our fathers”</td>
<td>Genesis 12:1ff.; Genesis 22:15ff; Psalm 147:19; Micah 7:20</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Christian Worship* includes the Song of Mary in hymn 274 and in the service of Evening Prayer (p. 57-58).

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Notes on a Christmas Hymn

Did you know?

- The oldest Christmas hymn text in our hymnal was written in Latin at the beginning of the 5th century. (Which hymn is that?)

- The oldest hymn tune for a Christmas hymn in our hymnal was composed possibly as early as the 11th century. (It is the tune for the hymn above.)

Richard Niell Donovan (lectionary.org) offers the following background for this hymn:

In the early centuries of the church, there was a serious dispute regarding Jesus' divinity—whether Jesus was, in fact, God or merely human. The Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) settled the matter, stating unequivocally that Jesus was fully divine. The Nicene Creed grew out of the findings of that council.

Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius was born in Spain a few years after the Council of Nicea. He became a successful lawyer and statesman, but retired to a life of poverty in his later years so that he could devote those years to writing Christian poetry.

This hymn was one of his poems. He wrote it to express his faith that Jesus is, indeed, divine — the Son of God — not like the rest of us, who are children of God, but uniquely the Son of God — begotten by the Father's love — the Alpha and Omega — the beginning and end — evermore and evermore.

In this hymn, Prudentius calls us to praise Jesus, our God and king.

Share your thoughts and impressions of this hymn.
28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

29 “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,

you now dismiss your servant in peace.

30 For my eyes have seen your salvation,

31 which you have prepared in the sight of all people,

32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles

and for glory to your people Israel.”

33 The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” (Luke 2:28-35, NIV)
1. Look at Luke 2:22-28 and Leviticus 12, and describe the circumstances surrounding this song.

2. The word translated “dismiss” in verse 29 can mean “to set free or release” or “to dismiss or send away.” Which shade of meaning do you think fits this context better, and why?

3. What kind of confession is contained in the words “Sovereign Lord” and “servant”?

4. There really is no indication that Simeon is old or near death when he speaks these words. However, how are these words appropriate for someone who is near death?

5. Who is the most famous person you have ever seen? Compare that person with what Simeon saw.

6. Why did Simeon say “your salvation” instead of “my salvation”?

7. The word for “people” in verse 31 is the word that often was used to refer specifically to the Jewish nation. How are the Jews, specifically, without excuse concerning God’s plan of salvation?

8. How had God prepared his salvation “in the sight of all people”?

10. How is Jesus a light for revelation to the Gentiles?

11. How is Jesus a light for the glory of God’s people Israel?

12. How did Mary and Joseph react to Simeon’s words about Jesus? Why do you think they reacted this way?

13. After his song, what additional things did Simeon prophesy about Jesus?

14. How would Jesus cause “the falling and rising of many in Israel”? Cf. Isaiah 8:14, 1 Corinthians 1:22-24, 1 Peter 2:6-8

15. What does Simeon prophesy about Mary?

*Christian Worship* includes the Song of Simeon in Hymn 269 (and Hymn 78), in the “Common Service” (p. 24) and in “Evening Prayer” (p. 61). *Christian Worship: New Service Settings* includes the Song of Simeon in the “Common Service” and two settings in its two versions of “Prayer at the Close of Day.”

16. How is the Song of Simeon a fitting song to sing following the Lord’s Supper?

17. How is the Song of Simeon a fitting song to sing in an evening worship service?
Christian Worship includes Christmas hymns from many different languages and traditions. See if you can identify one or more Christmas hymns (CW 33 – 68) with each of the following characteristics:

- Originally written in Norwegian:
- Originally written in Bohemian:
- Originally written in German:
- Originally “macaronic” (partly Latin, partly German):
- Originally written in Swedish:
- Originally written in English:
- Originally written in Danish:
- Originally written in French:
- Originally written in Latin:
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- Awarded first prize in a Christmas carol competition sponsored by a Canadian Methodist periodical.

- Written in America:

- An African-American Spiritual:

- Written by Martin Luther:

- Written by Paul Gerhardt (17th century Lutheran theologian and hymn-writer):

- Its tune is a folk tune:

- Its tune is mentioned in Shakespeare’s “The Merry Wives of Windsor”:

- Designated in the Greek Orthodox calendar to be sung at Christmas:

- Originally contained at least 15 stanzas:

- Originally contained 3 or fewer stanzas: