

“Freedom from Your Foes and Fears”

Luke 1:66-80

Series: The Promise of Christmas Week 2. I will deliver you from darkness

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I like to think I'm a smart person; that I learn from my mistakes. Yet this Christmas season, I was outsmarted again. You may recall last Christmas I bought a spool of 100 large colored lights and strung them around the evergreen outside our house. They dazzled with Christmas joy. Yet a few nights later, I was shocked to discover all my new large colored lights were out. After some grumbling and guess work, I finally discovered the source of this Christmas black out. My wife's squirrel friends were excited to see a tree full of large colorful glow-in-the-dark acorns. They gnawed them right off the wires. The only satisfaction I got was knowing there was a squirrel out there with a 120 volt hairdo.

This year, I wised up: no lights around the evergreen tree, just on the gutters. It all looked great. And yet...a few nights later – another blackout. When I reached the end of the strand I saw two dangling wires. Drats! Outsmarted by bushy tailed rats! Again! All right. That's it. This means war. I restrung the lights and then brought out my secret weapon: Repels-All Animal Repellent. It's designed to repel birds, beavers, groundhogs, deer, skunks, raccoons, porcupines, armadillos and – best of all – squirrels. The active ingredients in Repels-All are dried blood, putrescent whole egg solids and garlic oil. According to the label:

This unique blend of ingredients causes a mild irritation to the animal's nasal passages. When an animal touches, tastes or smells Repels-All, it triggers the natural instinct to escape and the animal simply leaves.

I sprayed it on the re-strung lights. Unfortunately, I failed to read all the instructions – especially the part about not spraying the product on a windy day. Suddenly I had dried blood, rotten egg and garlic not just in my nasal passages but on my mustache. It triggered my natural instinct to escape. Unfortunately, I couldn't get away from myself. The label says it doesn't wash off with water. But it's alright – the smell wears off after two months.

This time of year, as the darkness descends, you may feel your difficulties are rising. Like a strike-force of squirrels, your challenges and troubles begin to gnaw away at your carefully constructed plans. This month you may feel you are:

- Tangled up in the crossed wires of a trying relationship.
- Burned out by the unending workload at school or the job.
- Blowing your fuse at your parent, your child, or your teen.
- Shocked by the news that your spouse had an affair or is planning to leave you.
- Powerless to stop a habit or an addiction.
- Sitting in the dark of debt, depression, disease or death.

When problems surround you, they can snap your power source and plunge you into darkness. Two things which often come at us in the dark are foes and fears. In many cases they are the same thing. Maybe, like me, you've tried to fight back against them with your own formula of

Repels-All. Yet sometimes your attempts seem to backfire on you. In especially dark situations you just want to run from your situation or even from yourself.

There is another way and Another One who wants to help. Our Advent series *The Promise of Christmas* focuses on God's promises to us. Last week we saw in the story of Mary how God promises to lift us out of discouragement and turn our upside down world right side up. This week we look at Mary's cousin Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah. In their story God makes another promise: I will deliver you from darkness.

This is a dark time for God's chosen people. They face foes and fears on every side. For most of the last seven centuries they were under one dictator after another. Many are still wrestling over our most recent election. Yet imagine life where you have no vote, no rights, and no protection, where the authorities are the people you most fear, where life expectancy is short and child mortality is high, where there are no electric companies, grocery stores, hospitals or public water, sewer and sanitation, where you are at the mercy of the weather or the next invading army which can kill you or sell you and your family into slavery.

In addition to all this, Zechariah and Elizabeth face an additional darkness all their own. Zechariah is a priest. His wife Elizabeth is descended from priests. So you have a preacher married to a preacher's daughter. And they are not hypocrites. They walk their talk. Luke says:

Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. (Luke 1:6).

They appear to be perfect ... except for one tiny problem.

But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. (Luke 1:7).

They were infertile. In ancient times this is more than a disappointment. Their neighbors view it as a sign of disgrace, as a punishment from God. Zechariah and Elizabeth are silent about their agony. They prayed and prayed for a child until there was no point in praying. Now they just suffer in silence and walk in darkness.

During that darkness, God's people held onto a promise made seven centuries before by the prophet Isaiah.

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. (Isaiah 9:1-2)

God promised to send them a Light to lead them out of darkness, a Light to free them from their foes and their fears. A Light to lead them home to Him.

In February 1954, a navy pilot took off from an aircraft carrier for a nighttime training mission off the coast of Japan. For unknown reasons his directional finder malfunctioned, and in the stormy weather he mistakenly headed in the wrong direction. To make matters worse, his instrument panel suddenly short-circuited, burning out all the lights in the cockpit. The pilot looked around and could see absolutely nothing. Nearing despair, he looked down and spied a faint blue-green glow trailing along in the ocean's ebony depths. He recalled the reason for this ghostly glow: a cloud of phosphorescent algae in the ocean was stirred up by the engines of his ship. While it was the "least reliable and most desperate method" of flying back to a ship safely, the pilot knew that was precisely what he needed to do. The light saved his life and guided him home. The pilot, Jim Lovell, would remember this deliverance when he courageously piloted the stricken Apollo 13 capsule through the vast darkness of space back home.¹

God gives us Jesus, the Light to follow in the darkness. According to the promise, the Light would appear in one of the darkest places – Galilee. And Zechariah and Elizabeth, for all their doubts and fears, would help prepare the way for the Light. In fact, when the angel Gabriel tells him the news, Zechariah doesn't believe it.

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time." (Luke 1:18-20)

If you want to frustrate a preacher, take away his or her voice. For the next nine months, while Elizabeth quietly expected their baby, Zechariah quietly reflected on God's promise.

At the naming of John the Baptist, Zechariah's silence is finally broken. His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. 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, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." (Luke 1:67-68, 76-79)

Jesus is the Light God sends to lead us out of darkness and the shadow of death into the path of His peace. How does He do this?

According to Zechariah, Jesus will give us **Freedom from Our Foes**. He proclaims, God has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us (Luke 1:69-71)

The phrase "horn of salvation" refers to a strong and victorious king. I'm sure when the people heard this prophecy they imagined a great warrior who would use military force to drive out

¹Sam Rodriguez, *Be Light* (Waterbrook Press, 2016), pages 105-106.

every enemy from the land. They may even imagine a great emperor who will conquer all lands in God's name.

You are probably facing conflicts in your life right now. These may range from mild irritation to open hostility. When faced with an enemy, our usual human reaction is fight or flight, force or flee. These are short term, quick solutions. God's methods are longer and more difficult. When it comes to enemies, Jesus lights a different path for us:

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:43-45)

Paul expands on what Jesus' taught:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:14,17,18, 20-21)

The burning coals are feelings of shame which hopefully change the mind and heart of your enemy. You might say, "That's the best way to get killed." That was certainly true for both Jesus and Paul and many of their followers.

But for a moment, let's look at the long term effect of these two approaches: fighting your enemies and loving your enemies. During the hundred years after Jesus' resurrection there were two Jewish revolts against their enemy Rome. Both ended in complete disaster. After the first revolt the Temple in Jerusalem was burned to the ground and never rebuilt. After the second revolt the Jewish people were banished from Palestine. Yet by the fourth century after Jesus' resurrection, the very Romans who oppressed, persecuted and killed Jesus, Paul, Peter and the other disciples eventually built Cathedrals in their names in Jerusalem.

By using faith instead of fighting or fleeing, you may come to understand your enemy, you may learn from your enemy, you may discover your part in the conflict. Faith helps you let go of grudges, lay down burdens, heal wounds, stop the argument in your head, forgive and get on with your life. Think for a moment about a person who opposes you. Ask yourself:

1. How does the conflict look for his/her perspective?
2. What is my part in the conflict? What can I change?
3. What would happen if I stopped fighting and forgave?
4. How can I best bless this person?

This is an extremely difficult thing to do. No one knows that better than Hassan John, a Christian pastor in Nigeria. Extremist Muslims label him an "infidel" and place a price of \$800 on his head. He never knows when someone will murder him to claim the prize. As an Anglican pastor and a part-time journalist for CNN, the 52-year-old Hassan is often surrounded by

violence and bloodshed. He's seen friends shot dead or injured in front of his eyes. As a reporter, he rushes to bomb scenes.

You see it again and again and again. You get to places where a bomb has just exploded. There are bodies all over the place. You visit people in the hospital. You go back and meet families, you cry with them, you console them, you do the best you can with them all the time.

But this violence and hatred do not stop him from reaching out to his Muslim neighbors. He began by helping a small Muslim girl whose father was killed in the violence. He reached out to other orphans. Soon he helped 12 Muslim women, then 120. Young Muslim men in the area are starting to ask if they can find help as well. He even eats meals with Muslims. Hassan explained, "Now in Nigeria that is a big thing. You don't eat with your enemy because you are afraid that you will be poisoned. Now Christians build friendships with Muslims; it is just so marvelous."² Jesus, who never conquered a single square inch of territory, has transformed millions of former enemies into followers. That includes you and me. He has brought us the hope of salvation.

Zechariah says Jesus will also bring **Freedom from Our Fears**. He will come to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (Luke 1:74-75)

I was in Martha's Vineyard this summer where they filmed the movie *Jaws*. That movie causes many to fear the water. Yet less than one American (0.92 people) dies each year from a shark attack. So just in case you really need something better to worry about, here's a list of some items more likely than sharks to cause your death:

Vending machines account for 2.06 deaths per year.

Riding lawnmowers take 5.22 lives per year.

Fireworks cause 6.6 deaths per year.

Skydiving accidents account for 21.2 deaths per year.

Getting crushed by furniture causes an average of 26.44 deaths. This statistic led the comedian Stephen Colbert to issue a warning against the perils of "terrorist furniture."

Actually the things that contribute to 87% of American deaths are smoking, poor diet, lack of physical activity and alcohol – things we should really fear.

The truth is our fears keep us imprisoned and prevent us from being the people God designed us to be. Yet most of them will probably never happen. As someone once said FEAR stands for False Evidence Appearing Real. So how can we be free from debilitating fear? The only way out is to know there is Someone more powerful than your fears. You won't fear the bully if your big brother is stronger. You won't fear the disease if you know death is not the end of the story. You won't fear danger if you know you have a Savior.

But you have to let the Savior come into your prison, into your fears, into your darkness. The movie *The 33* tells the true and terrifying story of 33 miners buried 2000 feet underground in

² Clement Ejiolor, "Boko Haram Placed a Bounty on Christian Pastor from Jos," *Naij.com* (12-3-15)

a Chilean mine. Eventually they gather in a large room called The Refuge. They have no idea if anyone will come for them. On August 5th, a devout Christian named Don Jose Henriquez, whispers, "God is the only way out of this." The others ask, "Don José, we know you are a Christian man, and we need you to lead us in prayer. Will you?" Henriquez invites them to kneel. "We aren't the best men, but Lord, have pity on us. Jesus Christ, our Lord, let us enter the sacred throne of your grace. Consider this moment of difficulty of ours. We are sinners and we need you." Here, in this tomb, the faith that many of them found annoying on the surface is exactly what they need. In the darkness of the cave, the men begin to confront the fears and darkness within themselves. Víctor Segovia knows he drinks too much. Víctor Zamora is too quick to anger. Pedro Cortez has been a poor father to his young daughter whom he doesn't visit.

"We want you to make us stronger and help us in this hour of need," Henriquez says. "There's nothing we can humanly do without your help. We need you to take charge of this situation. Please, Lord. Take charge of this."

Later Henriquez, whom they call the Pastor, befriends Dario, a sullen, unpopular alcoholic who is hated by the others for stealing precious rations. Later, deprived of his booze, Dario rolls on the ground, crying out in both physical pain and emotional anguish. When the Pastor reaches out to comfort him Dario is mystified as to why the man doesn't hate him like everybody else does. "Hate is for children," The Pastor says, and he offers to pray with Dario. There, in the darkness, Dario confesses his sins and begins his long trip toward redemption. When the miners are finally rescued they leave behind a telling memorial: Here lived 33 Miners August 5 – October 13. God was with us.

This Christmas, let God be with you in your darkness. Let Him give you the courage to be free from your foes and fears. And let Him use you to drive away the foes and fears of others. You can do that in two ways. Give the gift of Eternal Life. Invite a friend or family member to worship our new born King by giving them the postcard. It's easy. It's non-threatening. It's an invitation to receive the greatest gift of all – eternal life.

Second, give the Gift of a Healthier Life. In the Tete Province of Mozambique women and girls like Mary and Elizabeth awake before sunrise every morning. They load up with five gallon plastic jugs and begin to walk. Some carry a baby on their backs. As the sun rises they are already several miles from home. Finally, reaching the nearest stream, they gather and carry back the gallons of water they will need for cooking, bathing, drinking and watering their livestock. The whole circuit will be repeated again in the evening. Imagine all the energy it takes them to fulfill this most basic task which we can perform by simply turning on the tap. Yet what makes it worse is the streams are often saturated with pollution, animal droppings and disease.

Last fall when Nedson Zulu and Sebber Banda visited us they said a well can cost as much as \$14,000 but because they were able to drill several the cost came down to \$10,000 each.

It is hard to overstate the amazing impact of a well on a village. Health improves dramatically where clean water takes the place of water collected from dirty rivers.

These wells give more than water. They share the Living Water. The bore hole is drilled next to a church which is sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with all who drink from it.

I have heard many a village chief or elder thank us for this wonderful gift of water with tears in their eyes. They expressed how these wells, given by strangers from a land that is farther away than they can even imagine, demonstrate God's love for them.

In these villages where the bore holes were drilled many have come to faith in the Lord and praised God for the miracle of life. God has delivered them from the darkness of their foes and fears.

Let Jesus come into your darkness and deliver you from your foes and fears. And let's help Him do the same for them.