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Luke 1:78-79, **NRSV.**

78 *"By the tender mercy of our God,*
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
79 *to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,*
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Joy of Vision: *The Song of Zechariah*.

Much of the Book of Psalms are ancient songs originally set to music. Most of us are aware of this, and that in some Psalms, there are musical instructions embedded in them. We don't have any music or melodies associated with these ancient songs. We do know that they used harps, lute-like instruments, and various other stringed instruments, as well as the ram's horn, trumpets, flutes, cymbals, drums, and rattles. We believe that some Psalms, rather than being sung to music, were chanted. The fact that Hebrew poetry does not rhyme in Hebrew, and that instead uses repeated rhythms of visual concepts, makes Hebrew Psalms easier to memorize than similar English material, which typically relies on the repetition of sounds lacking any semantics. This, combined with the tradition of singing or chanting them, made it easier for the Israelites, who were often illiterate, to memorize the Psalms. Further, other parts of the Bible, in both

the Old and New Testaments, were sung or chanted as a way of committing them to heart. There is much musical material throughout the Bible, and both the Israelites and the early Christians were heavy users of song in their services.

In Exodus, there is the Song of the Sea sung by Moses and the Song of Miriam, both sung after crossing the Sea. In Numbers, the Song of the Well is a community work song. In Deuteronomy, we have the Song of Moses, which is long and deeply theological. There is a victory song called the Song of Deborah and Barak in Judges. In 1 Samuel, we find the Song of Hannah, offering thanksgiving at the presentation of the Tabernacle. There is the Song of Deliverance, as well as the Song of the Bow, a lament mourning death, both in 2 Samuel. There are two books entirely of songs, the Song of Solomon and Lamentations. In 1 Chronicles, there is a song of Praise, offered when the Ark of the Covenant is moved. There is a Temple Dedication song and a song of praise to God in 2 Chronicles. There are multiple songs in Isaiah, celebrating restoration and offering prophesies. The Song of Habakkuk in Habakkuk is a prophetic prayer. In the New Testament, there are songs offered by Mary and Zechariah, both relating to the birth of John the Baptist, and a song glorifying God offered by angels, all in Luke. Also in Luke, Simeon offers a song upon seeing the baby Jesus. There are fragments of early hymns in Philippians, Colossians, and 1 Timothy.

There are multiple songs in the Book of Revelation. We'll look at just one example, from the Gospel of Luke, the song offered by Zechariah.

This song is in the first chapter of Luke, and it is sung by John the Baptist's father, at the birth of John. The backstory is that the Angel Gabriel tells Zechariah, a Temple Priest, that his elderly wife Elizabeth will have a son. Zechariah expresses some hesitation at believing this, and so, at this lack of trust in the messenger of God, Gabriel strikes Zechariah mute. Later, when the child is born, people expect the son to be called Zechariah, as well, but Gabriel had said that the child would be named John. The mute Zechariah, to make sure this happens, writes down the name "John", and at this moment, his voice returns.

Zechariah's song appears in the first chapter of Luke. While the song is nominally about the birth of John the Baptist, it is at a deeper level about the arrival of Jesus on Earth. Remember that John the Baptist is the person who introduces Jesus to the world and publicly initiates Jesus' ministry on Earth by spiritually cleansing him. This song is typically broken into two segments, the first praising God for keeping Old Testament promises of bringing a Messiah into the world. It is all about spiritual redemption. The second part is a prophesy, and this is focused more directly on John the Baptist himself, who will present the knowledge of Jesus' offer of salvation to the entire world. This song is often

called the Benedictus, which means “to bless”, and is frequently sung in Christian churches. Let’s look briefly at both parts of this song. The song contains phrases used repeatedly in the Old Testament, thus underlining for Jewish readers of the first and second centuries that the births of John the Baptist and Jesus are fulfillments of the Old Testament guarantees that go back to the earliest days of the Chosen People - the days of Abraham. Here is the first part of the Song of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, giving thanks for the birth of John, who would hold a strategic role in the life and teachings of the Messiah:

68 “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us 74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.

Here is the second part of the song, followed by one line written by Luke to wrap up the song, and root the theological importance of John the Baptist:

76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people

by the forgiveness of their sins.
78 By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."
80 The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Remember that much of the immediate motivation for Zechariah to sing, to be so excited at the birth of his son, John the Baptist, is that the moment he wrote down the name "John" to signify the new child's name, the name delivered by an angel, his ability to speak returned. These lines have always meant a lot to me:

63 He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.

I remember the morning after receiving my first corneal transplant, when the physician removed the bandage, that I could see, not that well, but significantly better, out of that one eye. I remember how much I praised God in that moment and gave thanks to the mother of the very

young woman who passed away, and whose cornea I received. It has always made the Song of Zechariah special to me.

Today, we celebrate the tradition of music in Christian worship, which goes back to the earliest days of the Hebrew people who made their way to Israel. We

give thanks for the magnificent music program we have here at LUMC. We do remember that music is a deeply inherent part of our faith. Amen.