Baby John and the Benedictus

1. Read Luke 1:57-58. How did God show Elizabeth mercy? Consider how this word harkens back to Mary's Magnificat which twice mentions this same word (verses 50 & 54).

   God has taken a childless aged woman and raised her up by giving her a son, and not just any son, but the forerunner of the Messiah. According to Mary's song God shows His mercy most often through reversal. The roles of the mighty and humble are reversed. The roles of the rich and hungry are reversed.

   ✞ Note: In the Old Testament, the concept of "mercy" is most profoundly encapsulated by the Hebrew word *hesed*. This intricate term reflects the depth of God's unwavering love and commitment to His people, emphasizing the covenant relationship He shares with Abraham's descendants. Remarkably, hesed appears 247 times throughout the Old Testament, with 128 instances found within the Psalms alone, highlighting its significance in the spiritual and emotional landscape of the faith.

   Transitioning to the New Testament, the essence of this divine mercy is conveyed through three key Greek terms*: eleos*, which means mercy; *agape,* which means sacrificial love; and *charis,* meaning grace. Together, these terms intertwine to articulate a continuity of God's *hesed* – His compassionate love and enduring relationship with humanity.

2. Read Luke 1:59-66. Why did they circumcise John on the eighth day? For reference, see Ge. 17:10-12.

   God commanded it as a sign of the covenant. They were faithfully doing what God commanded.

   ✞ Note: Why did God choose the eighth day? God had created the world in seven days. And since he created the world in an orderly fashion, time was measured in days and weeks. But the first seven-day week which was declared by God to be "very good," the goodness did not last. Time and creation was filled with pain, suffering and death when Adam and Eve fell into sin. God had made a promise to send a Seed who would reverse the effects of sin. God covenanted with Abraham, promising that the Seed would be one of his descendants that would bless all nations. Through the Seed a new "day" would dawn, a day which would never end, a day which would return creation back to the "very good" state that existed in the Garden in the beginning. This new, everlasting day is the eighth day, an eschatological day, a day that Christians look forward to when they will be in God's presence and live in joy forever. This is called the "eighth day theology" of early Christians who worshipped on Sunday, the eighth day. It is the day that Jesus rose from the dead. Eight is the number of people saved from God's judgement in Noah's ark.

Circumcision was to take place on the 8th day of a child's life. The consecration of the priesthood was on the eighth day. And the structure of New Jerusalem in Revelation has eight sides.

Luther observed the following concerning circumcision in Ge 17:10-11 (paraphrased). Christ rested on the seventh day, the Sabbath, because his work of re-creation was finished. He rose on the eighth day. Through his death, Christ brought an end to time. On the eighth day he entered a different kind of life, one in which there is one eternal day. There is no night. In that life the true circumcision will be carried out. At that time not only the foreskin of the heart will be circumcised – which happens in this life through faith – but the entire flesh and its essence [sinful nature] will be cleansed from all depravity in the resurrection of all flesh.

❸ Let's turn our attention to the next beautiful Christmas Carol, known as the Benedictus, as recorded by Luke. Read Luke 1:67-75. This canticle was sung on the day of John the Baptist's circumcision. If Mary's Magnificat captures the theme of reversal, Zechariah's Benedictus speaks, in the first part of it, of something equally profound: the theme of remembrance.

In verse 72, we encounter the word "remember," which, biblically speaking, holds great significance. In Old Testament Hebrew, this word is *zakar,* and it carries a deep theological meaning. When scripture mentions God remembering someone or something, it isn't just a fleeting thought; it precedes divine action on their behalf. Remembrance, in this context, is not merely a mental exercise—it's a profound act of love and mercy.

Throughout the Bible, we see how God's remembrance leads Him to act for individuals and for His people. He remembers Noah (Genesis 8:1), all living creatures (Genesis 9:15), Abraham (Genesis 19:29), Rachel (Genesis 30:22), Hannah (1 Samuel 1:19), and the nation of Israel (Leviticus 26:45; Numbers 10:9; Ezekiel 16:60). These moments illustrate that when God remembers, He springs into action, preserving, saving, and providing for His Creation.

Interestingly, though, when it comes to sin, God chooses to "remember their sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:34). Yet, His willingness to show grace is powerfully emphasized in Jeremiah 31:20: "Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore, my heart yearns for him; I must have mercy on him," declares the Lord.

In the Benedictus, Zechariah heralds a moment of divine intervention—a moment where God's remembrance, filled with mercy and grace, ignites hope for restoration. This melody not only reflects the overarching narrative of salvation history but also invites us to recognize how deeply God cares for each of us. His acts of remembrance are woven into the fabric of our lives, encouraging us to engage with His love and mercy in profound ways.

✞ In Ex 2:23-25 what did God's remembering of his covenant with Abraham lead to? What's the connection between this and Christmas? Just as God raised up Moses to deliver His people. God has raised up Jesus Christ to deliver us. Think also about record of Moses's birth and how as an infant Pharaoh killed all the Israelite babies, but Moses was saved. Herod tried to do the same thing to the baby Jesus. Connect Exodus 2:23-25 with Luke 1:72-73.

4. Read Luke 1:76-79. Zechariah's song tenderly addresses his precious newborn son, John, revealing not only the father's love but also the extraordinary role that John is destined to play. When we consider the theme of remembrance woven throughout the first part of the Benedictus, how does that beautifully illuminate what John's purpose will be in God's grand design?

John's mission is to prepare the way, to remind the people of God's unwavering love and the promise of hope that has been present since the dawn of time. When Zechariah sings about God "visiting" and "shining light" on those who dwell in darkness, he is emphasizing that John will play a vital part in bringing to remembrance God's covenant of mercy.

In a sense, John is the herald of remembrance, encouraging the people to look back and see how God has always cared for them, even in their darkest moments. His purpose is to awaken hearts to the reality of God's promises, drawing attention to the coming Messiah who would fulfill all that had been promised. In this way, Zechariah's beautiful song becomes not just a proclamation of John's great calling, but also a loving reassurance that God's memory of His people is alive and active, and he will always provide those who will guide His people and point them to His love and faithfulness in Christ.

5. Read Luke 1:80. What do you think the significance of John the Baptist growing strong in spirit and spending time in the wilderness before his public ministry suggests about the importance of preparation and solitude in spiritual life?

In the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), the formation of pastors is a deeply intentional and comprehensive process that ensures individuals are well-prepared for their sacred calling. This journey begins with extensive study and education, where potential pastors immerse themselves in a rigorous curriculum that covers various theological disciplines. They explore the Scriptures, dive into church history, and learn about the intricacies of Lutheran doctrine, all of which provide a solid foundation for their future ministry.

Moreover, the unique experience of "being set apart" through residential life at the seminary plays a crucial role in this formation process. Living within a community of fellow students and faculty fosters an environment where pastoral candidates can engage in meaningful discussions, share experiences, and develop their understanding of what it means to serve as a leader in the church. This communal aspect allows for the development of relationships that will support them throughout their ministries.

We don't just rush pastors into the pulpit; rather, we believe that true ministry requires preparation that goes beyond mere academic knowledge. As students are shaped through rigorous education, they begin to cultivate essential pastoral skills, such as preaching, counseling, and administering the sacraments. This multi-faceted approach equips them not only to deliver sermons but also to respond to the diverse needs of their congregations with compassion and wisdom. It is a holistic formation process that emphasizes spiritual growth, leadership, and a commitment to serving God's people in ways that reflect the love of Christ.

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