

Wednesday in Advent 2 2017
Luke 1:25
Grace Alone

“THUS THE LORD HAS DONE FOR ME IN THE DAYS WHEN HE LOOKED ON ME, TO TAKE AWAY MY REPROACH AMONG PEOPLE.”

Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in the sight of God. They both had received the righteousness that comes by faith in Christ Jesus. But, Zechariah and Elizabeth were not righteous in the sight of others. God, in his mercy and grace, may have seen their faith as the justification for their sins, but the people who lived around them saw their infertility as the justification for their scorn and derision.

Surprised? Today, infertility is seen as a frustration and disappointment. Couples who want to have children, and who are working with doctors in order to make that happen, are encouraged by their family members and friends. But in the day of Zechariah and Elizabeth, infertility was seen as punishment by God for wickedness and rebellion; and so, infertile couples were often treated as social outcasts.

But listen again to what Elizabeth says at the end of this story, “the Lord has taken away my reproach among people.” Reproach is shame. Reproach is criticism. Elizabeth felt people were looking down on her because she could not have a child.

Of course, Elizabeth should have felt the respect and honor of those around her. Her husband was a priest in the order of Abijah. She was descended from Aaron, the brother of Moses. They both had the perfect religious pedigree! But Elizabeth was barren. And now she and her husband were both very old. And no children meant no blessing from God. And in the eyes of some ... this actually disqualified them from the kingdom of God.

Tonight, we consider the second of four *solas* of the Reformation. Last week, we considered Sola Scriptura, by the Scriptures alone do we know Christ our Savior and what a God-pleasing life is.

Sola Gratia, Grace Alone, is the second of the four *solas*. We are delivered from our sins by grace alone. We cannot gain eternal life by our own good works. There is no merit or worthiness in us that can win God's favor. It is all given to us as a gift from God...solely by grace.

To illustrate this point look no further than the hopeless situation of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Elizabeth was barren. And now both she and her husband were too old to conceive a child. They would have to live out their remaining days childless and as social outcasts. They would simply have to accept the scorn and derision of others who saw their barrenness as proof that God was ... punishing them.

But then God breaks into the story! He opens Elizabeth's barren womb and she bears a son. God takes an impossible situation and turns it into remarkable joy. God gives the gift of life to those who counted their bodies as good as dead. He gives the gift of a son to those who had no hope of a son or a daughter in their life. And the gift of this son means the reproach of God and all people has been removed.

Sin makes us feel the reproach of God. It makes us feel bad. It makes us sense we are social outcasts both before others and before God. We understand we are not in a right relationship with God. And we can sense the scorn and derision of others. Sin does that to you. It makes you feel guilty. And we wonder: do people know about our sin? Can they not tell when we are being selfish and uncaring, that we are not loving?

Elizabeth's feelings may have been real or imagined. She may have only assumed the worst about those who noticed their situation. But, you

know what? We do the same thing. The couple sitting at the table besides us laughs, and we are quick to assume they are laughing at us, instead of sharing a light moment between them. We read that post on the internet and sense it was written about us. And, we are angry and ashamed, and feel condemned!

We may feel that way with our neighbors, but the reproach and shame we feel in the presence of God is very real. Look at the stories in the Bible. It is pretty uncomfortable being in the presence of the holy God! Isaiah blurted out, "I am ruined! I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Is 6:5). Peter in the great catch of fish recognized he stood before the Lord's own anointed and he cried out, "Depart from me Lord! I am a sinful man!" (Lk 5:8) We feel uncomfortable in the presence of God because we know the shame and reproach of our sins. He is holy, and we are not.

That is why this advent season is so important to us. We get to hear again, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:11). God comes to our rescue in the person and work of Christ. That baby born in the city of David grows to be the very Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is born for us and our salvation! He removes our sin. He gives us his righteousness as his very own. And His grace, in Word and Sacraments, empowers us to keep the commandments of God.

At the end of this story you have a very happy couple. Zechariah and Elizabeth are very happy to be the parents of a new baby boy. Who wouldn't be joyful at the birth of child especially in such circumstances? But you have to understand that Zechariah and Elizabeth aren't just happy

for themselves. They see the bigger picture. They heard what the angel said, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.” “Many will rejoice at his birth,” says the angel. The whole world will rejoice at his birth, for this son isn’t just for Zechariah and Elizabeth to enjoy, but this son will go before the way of the Lord.

Just like Zechariah and Elizabeth’s whose bodies were as good as dead to the hope of a baby boy, so too God has given life to our mortal bodies. As it is written, “You were dead in your trespasses and sins in which you used to walk...but God, being rich in mercy...made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.” Grace means God accomplishes the impossible in our lives. He removes the reproach of our sins. He removes everything that makes us uncomfortable with ourselves standing before a holy God. He removes our dishonor, shame and embarrassment because of our sins. And He allows us to stand fully as his redeemed children in Christ.

Martin Luther wrote in his most excellent book, “Bondage of the Will” these very words: “Grace is freely given to the most undeserving and unworthy and is not obtained by any strenuous efforts, endeavors, or works, either small or great, not even by the efforts of the best and most honorable men who have sought and followed righteousness with a burning zeal.”

We are saved by grace alone, grace that moved God to send His own Son to remove the reproach of all of our sins.
To God be the Glory. Amen.