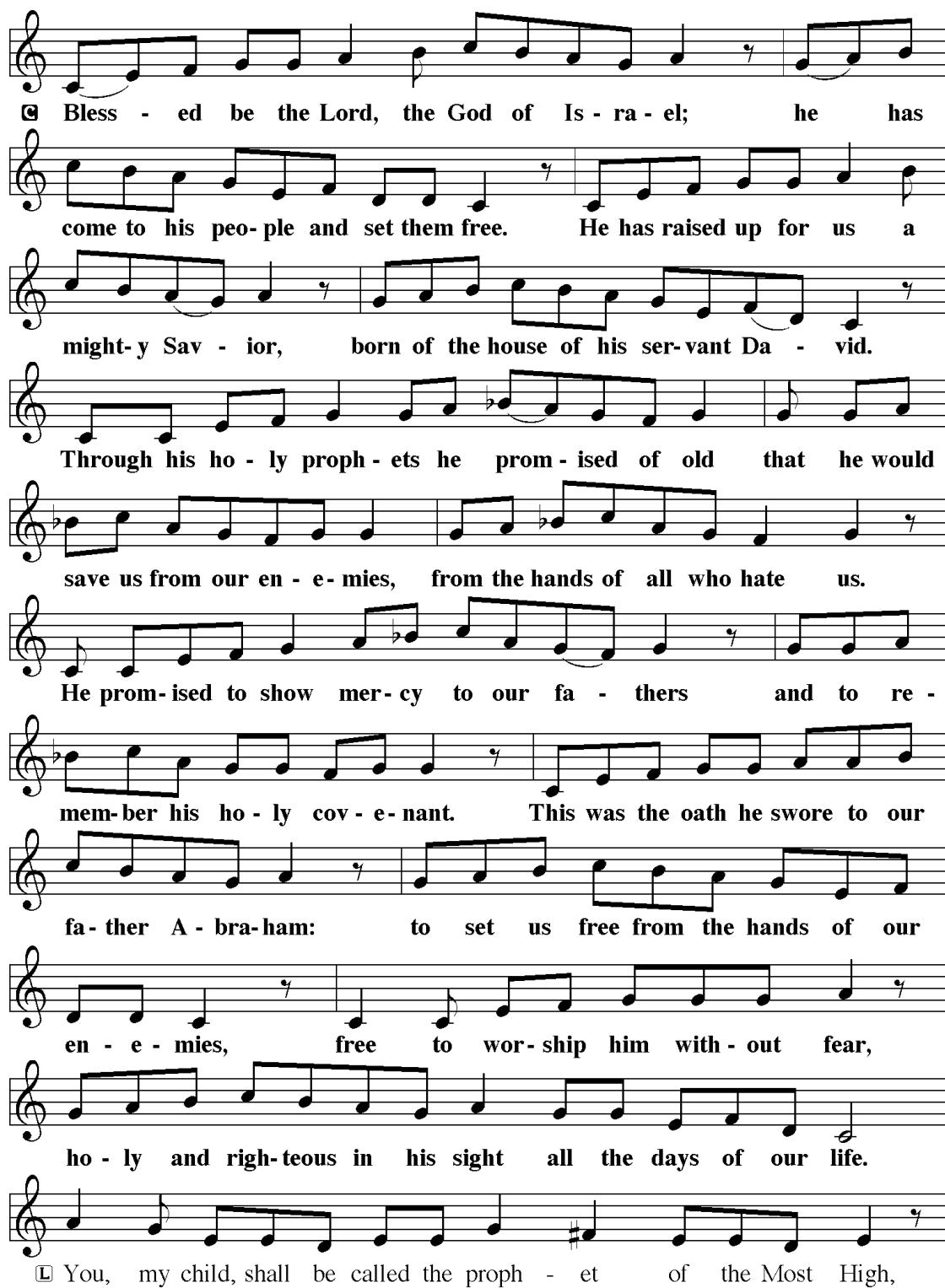


**Grace, Mercy & Peace from God our Father and our Lord, Jesus Christ.**

Consistent with this year's Advent theme – *How can I keep from Singing* – Zechariah – father of John the Baptist – who has remained mute for nearly a year suddenly breaks into song:



Bless - ed be the Lord, the God of Is - ra - el; he has  
come to his peo - ple and set them free. He has raised up for us a  
mighty Sav - ior, born of the house of his ser - vant Da - vid.  
Through his ho - ly proph - ets he prom - ised of old that he would  
save us from our en - e - mies, from the hands of all who hate us.  
He prom - ised to show mer - cy to our fa - thers and to re -  
mem - ber his ho - ly cov - e - nant. This was the oath he swore to our  
fa - ther A - bra-ham: to set us free from the hands of our  
en - e - mies, free to wor - ship him with - out fear,  
ho - ly and righ - teous in his sight all the days of our life.  
L You, my child, shall be called the proph - et of the Most High,

for you will go be - fore the Lord to pre - pare his way,  
 to give his peo - ple knowl-edge of sal - va - tion by the for - give-ness  
 of their sins. In the ten - der com- pas- sion of our God,  
 the dawn from on high shall break up - on us,  
 to shine on those who dwell in dark-ness and the shad - ow of death,  
 and to guide our feet in - to the way of peace.

Zechariah – having lived ***his whole long life under Roman domination***, whose people have lived ***under foreign domination for more than 700 years*** – suddenly breaks into song when he agrees against the objections of friends and neighbors that the child should be called John – ***the name given by the Angel Gabriel*** – though that name runs counter to family tradition. ***Though he has miraculously become a father for the first time as an old man, this is not what Zechariah sings about. He sings of God's redeeming work even though the one he sings about – Jesus – is yet to be born.***

***Though he and his wife Elizabeth will never live to see the things he sings about, he knows and proclaims what God has done.*** Zechariah's joy comes not from the reality of this present life, but in spite of the trials, challenges, and even lamentation of this life. ***God's activity produces Zechariah's joy.*** His spontaneous song breaks into the world because he trusts and hopes that God is already and will yet to come bring in a reign of love and mercy.

At the end of his song ***Zechariah sings to his infant son John*** as well,

celebrating that John will be privileged to go before God's anointed preparing the way for others to receive Him. Zechariah is a Levitical priest. When he refers to his child as a prophet, I suspect that he *knows that his son's destiny comes at a precious price*; prophets always suffer and frequently die for announcing their God given message.

Ironically, Zechariah's song ends:

*To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our way into the way of peace.*

*I see many things around me this holiday season.* I see frozen turkeys filling our Food for Families Freezers. I see the business of *people trying to buy for everyone* on their list, so that no one will be disappointed. I know there are *Christmas cards* that need to be written, *presents* that need to be *wrapped* and *mailed* so they get there by Christmas day. I see *lights that need* to be hung out, *decorations that need* to be put up, trees on top of cars. I see *people spending extraordinary amounts* of money on people who don't need anything, while others have nothing. I see *disappointment already* that the holidays just aren't stacking up to what they're supposed to be.

***I see many things, but peace. Not too much peace.*** Nothing peaceful looking at all except on the afternoon after Christmas morning when everyone is just plain wore out, and that's exhaustion. *About the only place I see any peace is on Christmas cards.*

I understand the impulse we have to make the holiday special, but it seems to me *that in our attempts to make the holiday special, we've accidentally or maybe intentionally tried to make the holiday ourselves.* And because of this we ***lose sight of the glorious, unfolding story of God's ongoing work about which Zechariah sings.***

***Do you remember a time*** when Christmas was a time of joy and peace even though people did not receive copious amounts of Christmas booty? ***There was***

**such a time when joy created the season, rather than the season creating the joy.** That joy and peace remains, but **we must immerse ourselves in the reality of God's reign and future to find it.**

No shopping spree, no gift packaged and mailed, no gift received can avail us of that joy and peace. That comes only from acknowledging and proclaiming God's activity in the world through word and deed. **Sharing our hope guides us into the way of peace.**

God brings Zechariah's life into the story of God's redemption. His joy and singing come from recognizing that God includes he, Elizabeth and their son John in God greater story of redemption and new life; his activity is not the source of joy and peace.

**Jesus Christ comes and gives Himself that we might be forgiven, and righteously approach God - to live and dwell in the presence of God. Now we can bring ourselves into that story ourselves by immersing ourselves in God's redeeming story and work.** Then our feet are guided into the way of peace. There is the peace. We share this meal, his gift, to be strengthened and reminded to trust God's mercy, not our own ability.

This is **the repentance that John the Baptist seeks** from people:

**Turning our lives back towards God as center, and not afterthought.**

When we remind ourselves of God's great story of redemption everyday through prayer, Scripture, and sharing that story in word and deed we become aware that our lives are part of the life that Goes on in endless song, and then with Zechariah and Mary:

**How can we keep from singing!**

**AMEN !!!**