

Rev. Dan Welch Advent 4 12-19-21 Text- John 1:67-79
Wait Upon the Lord with Gratitude

They called Hetty Green “The Witch of Wall Street.” She died in 1916, leaving behind an estate valued at over one billion dollars. That’s billion with a “b”! But get this. Every morning Hetty Green ate her breakfast cold because she didn’t want to pay to heat her oatmeal. And Hetty’s son had to have his leg amputated because she didn’t want to pay to take him to the doctor. Hetty Green was rich, but if you saw her, you’d swear that she was dirt poor.

We are rich in Christ Jesus! But most of the time you’d swear we were dirt poor! “Poor me! Look at my health.” “Poor me! Look at my finances.” “Poor me! Look at my job, my house, and my car.” “Poor me!” Shania Twain released a song a few years ago that says it all. “Poor me this, poor me that. Why do I keep looking back?”

Zechariah was singing this sorry song. You know his story. Finally—finally—in his old age Zechariah was going to be a father. What did Zechariah say to the angel Gabriel who delivered this good news? “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years” (Luke 1:18). Zechariah’s prayers had been answered. A son was going to be born. Zechariah was rich. But he responds as though he’s dirt poor.

All of that changed, though, when Zechariah’s son was born. Zechariah named him John—John the Baptist. That’s why Zechariah sings. This old man and new father sings about his spiritual wealth in Christ Jesus in a song of gratitude.

His song has two parts; Luke 1:68–75 gives thanks for what God has done in the past, while Luke 1:76–79 gives thanks for what God will do in the future. In the past? “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people” (Luke 1:68). In the future? “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins” (Luke 1:76–77). Do you see the central theme of Zechariah’s song? Forgiveness in the past. Forgiveness in the future. Forgiveness makes us exceedingly rich!

Have you ever been to New York City? I've heard the Big Apple is a wonderful place. Many will tell you that if you want a view of the New York skyline, go to the Brooklyn Bridge. If you want New York entertainment, go to Broadway. If you want New York inspiration, go to the Statue of Liberty. If you want to shop in New York, go to Fifth Avenue. But if you want to be depressed in New York, go to West 44th Street and spend a few minutes looking at the U.S. National Debt Clock. The sign is twenty-five feet wide, weighs 1,500 pounds, and uses 306 light bulbs. It constantly and mercilessly announces the U.S. debt and each family's share.

Did you know that you have a debt clock? So do I. Everyone on the planet has their own personal debt clock. We all have a clock that counts our insults, our ugly words, our evil acts, our raised fists, our cold shoulders, and all our failed promises.

Thanks be to God, though, that we are rich in divine forgiveness. God's forgiveness not only lays at the heart of Zechariah's song, the motif frames Luke's gospel. In Luke 3:3, John the Baptist announces, "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." In Luke 24:47—at the end of the gospel—Jesus announces to his disciples "that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations."

The debt we owe God has been paid for in full. The shortfall has been covered by Jesus. On Calvary's mountain Christ paid for every sin. Completely. Lovingly. Eternally.. What a Savior! Our riches in Christ Jesus abound and overflow!

I once heard about a little boy who was visiting Washington, D. C. He walked up to a park ranger and said, "I want to buy the Washington Monument." The park ranger thought he'd have a little fun, so he said, "How much have you got?" The little boy pulled out \$1.87. The ranger said, "Let me tell you three facts. Number one, it's not for sale. Number two, even if it was for sale, you couldn't afford it. And number three, since you're an American, it already belongs to you."

These same three facts are true of Christ's forgiveness for us. Number one. It's not for sale. Number two, even if forgiveness was for

sale, we couldn't afford it. And number three, it already belongs to us—Christ's forgiveness completely belongs to us! Lock, stock, and barrel! We're not spiritually bankrupt! We're not stuck in spiritual poverty! Gospel wealth is ours, free of charge! That's the heart and center of Zechariah's song. Divine forgiveness leads to the goal of Zechariah's song. He states it in Luke 1:79, "To guide our feet into the way of peace." The way of peace is the way of forgiveness—sharing Gospel riches with people who have hurt us.

C. S. Lewis writes, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until there's something to forgive." I think we'd all agree that it's usually not very easy to forgive someone that has done us wrong. And yet, forgiveness is the only way to truly heal after a hurt.

Now, to be clear forgiveness does not mean I forget what was done. Forgiveness means I cease and desist with my accusations, my temper tantrums, and my harsh judgments. Forgiveness means I resign as judge, jury, and prosecuting attorney. Why do that? Because we're rich! Ephesians 1:7 states that in Christ, "... we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace." Zechariah says that as we share the riches of Christ's forgiveness, we walk in the way of peace.

In Matthew 5:9, Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers." Jesus doesn't say, "Blessed are the peace fakers." Jesus doesn't say, "Blessed are the peace breakers." No. Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers." And the only way to make peace is to share Christ's forgiveness with people who have disappointed us. Forgiveness isn't a feeling. Let's be honest. If we wait until we feel like forgiving, we will never forgive. Forgiveness is an act of my will. Forgiveness is something I decide to do. Forgiveness is sharing the wealth God has freely given me in Christ. It is a way of offering thanksgiving to God.

Forgiveness isn't an instant solution to hurt and pain. Forgiveness, though, is the only solution to hurt and pain. It really works! And for that we are truly grateful to God. Wait and thank. Wait and thank. God's blessings of peace in Him and freedom from sin will come at long last through the power of forgiveness.

On December 30, 2012, a long-lost relative of the New York billionaire Huguetta Clark was found dead. Some children discovered Timothy Gray's body frozen under a Union Pacific Railroad overpass near Evanston, Wyoming. Gray was the half great-nephew of Clark, who had died a year and a half earlier. Timothy Gray died completely unaware that he was entitled to 6.25 percent of her copper mining fortune, which people conservatively estimated to be \$19 million!

How often do we miss out on Gospel treasures? How often do we find ourselves freezing under some bridge, singing, "Poor me this, poor me that. Why do I keep looking back?" There is a better way. Sing Zechariah's song of gratitude for forgiveness! Then what?

No more poor me this or poor me that. We're done with looking back! Instead, we're looking to the one who makes us and others rich in every way—Jesus!

Take the time during this last week of Advent, while we are waiting for the joy of Christmas Day, to give thanks for the richness we have through Christ's forgiveness, and to further show gratitude by sharing our forgiveness with others. What a thankful way to wait. Amen.