

## Are You Ready?

Luke 1:1-25, 57-80

### Introduction

**Christmas Movies:** ♥ Advent & all it has to offer (physical reminders, traditions, decorations, songs, weather, clothes, colors, etc.). #tangible

- One of my favorite things to do is watch Christmas movies.
  - I saw online recently that Hallmark research scientists are close to discovering a second plot for one of their upcoming Christmas movies.
- Classically best Christmas movies: Home Alone 2, White Christmas, Elf
- Surprising Christmas Movies: *new* Grinch, Die Hard, Batman Returns

**A Good Story:** A good movie has the ability to teach you something, often in a more profound way than a lecture. Stories are written, constructed, organized, and crafted not simply **to inform** you but to **move you**.

- Even **true stories** (e.g., documentaries, cf. *The Rescue*) are done in such a way as to **compel** you (whether to action or awe).
- Stories also help you **make sense** of the world. They show how the pieces relate to the whole. They give a conceptual framework. A good story has explanatory power.
- The characters, the sequence of events, and the narrative selection all come together for a **purpose**.

**Till the Soil:** During Advent, we're going to spend four weeks looking at four different sets of **characters** (four scenes). We'll look at Zechariah (+Elizabeth, John the B), Mary, the Shepherds, and (finally) Simeon and Anna.

- In this week's look at old Zechariah, we see that Luke calls us to **prepare our hearts to hear the gospel story**.

### 1. A True Story (vv. 1-4)

<sup>1</sup> Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, <sup>2</sup> just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, <sup>3</sup> it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

**Another Account:** Luke<sup>1</sup> is building off of the work of others. The gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, & John (not to be confused with the gospel) are **theological biographies**, each telling the story of Jesus to make a point (e.g., different angles on a sports replay, slow-mo, full-speed, booth commentary; the same events, different perspectives).

---

<sup>1</sup> Author is **formally anonymous** but traditionally Paul's companion, Luke. There is no physical, historical evidence of another author.

**True Story:** Though this story is told from Luke's research and for his purposes, it is a true story. These things actually were "fulfilled" among them. There were eyewitnesses to everything said (e.g., Luke 80 CE, 5 decades, I couldn't make something up that happened in 1980 because people would still be alive; different than most other ancient literature).

- "The earliest source for Alexander [the Great] used by modern historians is more than 260 years after his death, and the most reliable source is more than 370 years removed" (Licona).
- Luke shows a more sophisticated and detailed narrative. "Inasmuch" is a classical Greek term (not NT or LXX).
- His account has been arranged with careful examination, detailed investigation, and thoroughness (hence more extended and detailed narratives, including a few unique stories not found in earlier accounts).

**The gospels are not fables or fairy tales.**

**Purpose:** The purpose of all of this is not just historical detail but to **reassure** believers that they have placed their faith in the right person.

- Theophilus ("beloved of God") is either a person's name, a person's pseudonym, or a way to describe all believers. \*It also connects Luke to Acts: "In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1). Luke (vol 1), Acts (vol 2).

Jesus Christ's life is the proof of God working in history. "More than an infallible or inescapable argument, we have an infallible and inescapable person" (Keller *adapted*).

- Everything else (even good things) you put your faith in will let you down. Jesus won't.

## 2. A Surprising Start (vv. 5-25)

**Characters:** <sup>5</sup> In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. <sup>6</sup> And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. <sup>7</sup> But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

- The first characters we're introduced to are **Zechariah** and **Elizabeth** (Zeke and Liz).
  - Both have priestly backgrounds (e.g., division of Abijah and daughters of Aaron).
- They were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

**Abraham and Sarah 2.0:** The problem they have is **barrenness** that can't be fixed because they're too old (past childbearing years). Barrenness is a **practical** (e.g., 401k, legacy, etc.) and **theological** (e.g., seen as divine punishment, lack of blessing, etc.) problem.

- The situation has a lot of reminders of the story of Abraham and Sarah, advanced in years, aware of the promises of God, yet unable to have children.
  - **Expectedly unexpected.** In the same way, God made a new nation out of a barren couple at the start of Israel's history, another barren couple signals God is doing something new.

**Priestly Duty:** <sup>8</sup> Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, <sup>9</sup> according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup> And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. <sup>11</sup> And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.

- The priests of Israel were divided into different classes or divisions (24), and they each served a couple of weeks a year at the temple. With so many to choose from, Zechariah was chosen by casting lots to enter the Holy place and burn incense. This would have likely been a **once-in-a-lifetime opportunity**.

**Angelic Visitation:** A pattern in Scripture and a pattern in Luke occurs here. An angel shows up, producing great fear, and the messenger tells them not to fear (e.g., Zechariah, Mary, Shepherds). Pattern = angel, fear, “do not fear.”

- Fear fell upon him = overcome with fear. \*Seen in Exodus that fear is the right and normal response to God and his messengers. We too often fear the wrong things instead of fearing God. When you fear the right thing, you don't have to fear the wrong thing.
- Maybe we need a little more fear and reverence when it comes to God.
  - 70% of Americans believe in angels. 30% say they've experienced one. One lady said an angel helped her bake a casserole. In the Bible, when you see an angel you say, “Please don't kill me,” not, “Should I add a touch more cinnamon?”. In the Bible, Angels are not sweet Della Reese visitors with Pillsbury Doughboy bodies and Precious Moments smiles, they're terrifying representatives of the most high God.

<sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him, “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. <sup>14</sup> And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. <sup>16</sup> And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, <sup>17</sup> and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

**Do Not Fear:** The only one who you *should* fear has fully forgiven and accepted you in Christ. **The one with the power to cause you fear tells you “not to fear.”**

**Answered Prayer:** Your prayer has been heard A prayer for a son! But a pray that is bigger than that. This will not just be a son for Zechariah & Elizabeth, but for many of the children of Israel.

- He will be a prophet in the power of Elijah. He was the promised “Elijah to come” <sup>10</sup> This is he of whom it is written, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you” (Matt 11:10). “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of

fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction” (Mal 4:5-6).

- He will be set apart (e.g., no strong drink, cf. Nazarite vow, e.g., Samson).
- He will bring **joy** to Zechariah, Elizabeth, and many others.
  - He will take away the barrenness of Zechariah and Elizabeth, but in a greater way, he will take away the spiritual barrenness of the people of Israel.
  - \*Like Samuel with Hannah, Isaac with Sarah, Jesus with Mary, so is John with Elizabeth. This child is not just for the personal benefit of their earthly parent but for the glory of God. Children are not treasures to be hoarded but gifts to be stewarded for the KoG (e.g., arrows in quiver).

**What’s In A Name:** Only a few people in the Bible have their names given by God before they’re born (Isaac,\* Ishmael, Solomon, Josiah, Jesus). A few more received name changes (e.g., Abraham and Sarah).

- God rather than Zechariah is naming the child because he has a God-given role.
  - His job will be to go before Jesus the Messiah, to call people **to repent** (to turn), to **prepare them** for the arrival (again quoting Mal

<sup>18</sup> And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” <sup>19</sup> And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel.<sup>2</sup> I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. <sup>20</sup> And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.” <sup>21</sup> And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. <sup>22</sup> And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. <sup>23</sup> And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

**Doubt:** Zechariah’s response to this **good news** is as **lamentable** as it is **predictable**. For someone living in disappointment for so long, God’s promise is too good to be true. There is a deep wound.

- Like Abraham and Sarah, he’s in good company. He can’t imagine that someone as old as him and Sarah could have a son. **Doubt is natural and normal but never commendable**. The gospel of Luke is particularly hard on people who seek signs. The journey of faith is not about understanding how God will do what he says but trusting *that* God will do what he promised.
- Natural doubt (Luke is particularly hard on those who seek signs)

If we pray for God to intervene, why are we surprised when God hears and answers our prayers? When God shows up, instead of second-guessing, try gladly receiving.

---

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel means “God is my strength” or “God is mighty.” Gabriel is marked by God, from the presence of God (cf. Ex 23:21). An attendant at the throne of God, his name is never missing from an angel list (cf. Rev 1:4). He is also the angel that brings eschatological good news (cf. Daniel “70 weeks”).

**Time Out:** Zechariah gets the “shhh” treatment. He gets put in time out to learn his lesson. This is discipline, not punishment (e.g., spiritual surgery, hurt to heal; scalpel vs stabbing).

**Elizabeth:** <sup>24</sup> After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, <sup>25</sup> “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”

- Elizabeth becomes one of the best pictures of Advent. She receives the promise of the Lord and patiently waits. For her, **the promise is as good as the reality**. She can speak about what the Lord’s promise is as good as done.
  - **The invitation of Advent is to wait with joyful gratitude in anticipation of the arrival of God’s promise.**

**Surprising Start:** This is still a surprising start to the Gospel of Luke. It seems odd to start a story about Jesus with a story about his extended relatives.

- Zechariah and Elizabeth are the necessary start to the story of Jesus because the preparation is as important as the arrival.
- The time of faithful waiting, believing the promise is as important as the moment the promise arrives. The waiting is the season where God makes you into the person ready to joyfully receive that promise.

### 3. A Joyful Arrival (vv. 57-80)

**Unexpected Protocol:** <sup>57</sup> Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. <sup>58</sup> And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. <sup>59</sup> And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, <sup>60</sup> but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” <sup>61</sup> And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” <sup>62</sup> And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. <sup>63</sup> And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all wondered.

- The time was “fulfilled” (1:1), the appointed time came for their son to be born (in God’s time). Everyone was filled with joy for this couple they thought would never have kids.
- As a good Jewish family does, they went to get their boy circumcised on the 8th day.
- At the same time, he would receive his name.
  - Everyone thought the boy would be named after his dad, “Zeke Jr.”
  - In obedience to God, Mom and Dad stand firm on the God-given name (not the “traditional” option because he has a special purpose). **They are not worried about custom, they are worried about obedience.**
    - Ask Liz (don’t like the Answer). Ask Zeke (gets a writing tablet). \*Kinda like getting told by one parent and then asking the other.
- This causes everyone to “wonder.” Something unique is going on.

**Zeke Learned:** Zechariah learned his lesson. He stood firm on the promise and command of God. He’s not doubting or dragging his feet.

- The temporary discipline of God, re-formed him into the man God wanted him to be (e.g., boot camp). God will break you to change you. **Salvation that can't change you isn't salvation.** “Some things are worthless after they are broken. Christians are worthless until they are broken.”
- God often has to break you so you'll be able to see his blessing for what it is.

**Prepping the Crowds:** <sup>64</sup> And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. <sup>65</sup> And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, <sup>66</sup> and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him.

- The purpose of this whole endeavor was not just for this one couple but for the whole land. God used this miraculous birth to cause everyone to stop and consider what God might be doing.
  - Your salvation is not merely for your own benefit but to get everyone else's attention and get them to stop and consider what God is doing.

**Praise:** <sup>67</sup> And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, <sup>68</sup> “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people <sup>69</sup> and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, <sup>70</sup> as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, <sup>71</sup> that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; <sup>72</sup> to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, <sup>73</sup> the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us <sup>74</sup> that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, <sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. <sup>76</sup> And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, <sup>77</sup> to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, <sup>78</sup> because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high <sup>79</sup> to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” <sup>80</sup> And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

- One long praise sentence.<sup>3</sup> God has showed up! The promise of God going all the way back to the covenant to Abraham and David is coming to fruition.
- Visited, redeemed, saved, mercy, promise. **Our faithful God keeps his promises.**
- John was the last and greatest prophet leading up to the promised Savior of whom the prophets prophesied. He was God's messenger, **the mouthpiece of God**, clearing the way for the Messiah to come. John was not just calling the people to return to God but to prepare for God's arrival. He is a pivotal figure (literally pivot). He is not only the greatest prophet: <sup>11</sup> Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist (Matt 11:11). Various miracles highlight the importance of John (e.g., barren/old give birth, angelic visitation, God-given name, restoration of speech).

---

<sup>3</sup> The prayers of Zechariah and Mary in Luke 1 are traditionally known by the Latin names of their opening words (*Vulgate*). Zechariah's prayer is the *Benedictus* (blessed or praised) and Mary's prayer is the *Magnificat* (magnifies or praises).

- John was *crystal clear*, he was not the Messiah, he came to prepare the way for the Messiah (e.g., John was born from a barren couple, Jesus was born of a virgin).
- John's job is to "light the path to Jesus." Jesus is the true light, which gives light to everyone (Jn 1:9), John is the one that reflects that light (e.g., moon and sun).

## Conclusion

**Prepared to Receive:** The time had come for the "earth to receive her king." Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John were helping prepare the way for the arrival (*advent*) of Jesus.

- John will 'till the soil' for the seed of the Kingdom of God to bear fruit
- Are you prepared this Advent for the arrival of Jesus?
  - Maybe your heart is bitter and disappointed this year, so you doubt God has good things for you.
  - Maybe your heart is broken and despairing, and you can't imagine joy this time of year.
  - Maybe your life is busy and overwhelming, and you can't find space to receive Christ in your life.
- Let me encourage you to let God till the soil of your heart to make room to receive Jesus, your Savior. Tilling is can be a painful but necessary process (e.g., break up soil, remove weeds, plant, recover, water, etc.). As God rips up idols, distractions, and sins he will make space for his Spirit to grow beautiful fruit.
  - Identify the things in your life keeping you from joyfully receiving Christ.
  - Turn from those things and turn to Christ.
  - Welcome his presence and trust his promises with joyful expectation.