

## **How It All Began Luke 1:1-80**

We start a new sermon series this week, covering Luke 1-5, and leading into Christmas.

Luke begins the story of Jesus differently from the other Gospel writers. In particular, he tells us more about the events leading up to Jesus' birth.

Luke portrays Jesus' birth against the backdrop of two types of stories in the Old Testament: (1) birth narratives of Israelite heroes, such as the birth of Isaac to the aged Abraham and Sarah, and Samuel to Elkanah and Hannah; (2) songs of deliverance, such as those sung in the aftermath of the exodus from Egypt, and at the close of the forty years of wandering through the wilderness.

The overall point is clear: Jesus' birth is miraculous (much as Isaac's and Samuel's), and salvific (much as the deliverance from Egypt, and divine protection through the wilderness wanderings). This is sacred history, in line with, but superceding, the pinnacles of salvation history within the Old Testament.

### **Day One: Luke 1:1-4 Preface**

A preface was a common feature in ancient literary writings, much as in contemporary literary or academic works. Four features of Luke's preface draw attention.

First, Luke's intention is to provide a well-researched, accurate report of Jesus' life and ministry, as a reliable foundation for faith: "so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (1:4). Toward this end, he researched the writings of the original eyewitnesses and earliest preachers.

Secondly, the fact that Luke adds yet another biography of Jesus (1:1) suggests that he has particular concerns, and seeks to bring Jesus' teaching to bear on the issues affecting his community.

Third, Luke wrote the preface in a polished, literary style. These four verses, for example, form one long sentence, with two sets of five parallel clauses:

*vv1-2 Luke's predecessors*

- many have undertaken
- to draw up an orderly account
- of the events that have been fulfilled among us
- from the beginning
- just as they were handed down to us

*vv3-4 Luke*

- it seemed good to me also
- to reconstruct
- everything
- from the beginning
- so that you may know the reliability of what you were taught

Fourth, Theophilus (meaning, 'lover of God') was likely socially prominent, and perhaps a political office holder ('most excellent' was typically – though not always – used of the political elite). Yet he was certainly not the sole intended audience for the work. In particular, Luke's gospel shows particular concern for the disenfranchised.

These four points have four corresponding applications for us.

First, Luke's access to eyewitness sources, and his care in research provides confidence in the historical basis for our faith. Secondly, Luke fills out the picture of Jesus (he neither simply repeats what he was told, nor does he invent stories out of thin air), so that we can understand more of his relevance to various life

circumstances, including our own. We both read Luke, and walk in his footsteps, as we apply Jesus' teaching to our own time.

Thirdly, Luke models the use of intellect in the service of God: this provides a helpful balance to the contemporary emphasis on emotions in spiritual devotion; let us not be too lazy to

understand this Gospel in its original intent, so that we can rightly appreciate its relevance for us. Fourth, the breadth of Luke's audience – from elite Theophilus to the poor, widowed, sick, and disenfranchised – serves as a model for what our church should be, and for the relationships that we should individually nurture.

## **Day Two: Luke 1:5-25 The conception of John the Baptist**

In this incident, Luke skillfully weaves together two contrasting elements of the birth story: (a) God's concern for geo-political issues and Israel's national fate; and, (b) God's concern for personal piety, and the life disappointments suffered by his worshippers.

The simple mention of Herod (1:5) was sufficient among ancient readers of the Gospel to conjure up two associations: (a) the elite social strata of political leaders within the Roman empire; and, (b) the corruption for which they were infamous. Herod was a half-breed Jew, subservient to the Roman occupiers, and vicious toward opponents and rivals (even toward his own sons). He taxed the populace heavily in order to support grandiose building projects (including the Jewish temple); he promoted Greek (Hellenistic) culture in Palestine, thus offending faithful Jews; and, he blatantly took control of the temple and priesthood for political ends. At all levels, it was a distressing time for the faithful, under the thumb of a cruel, corrupt, and crass tyrant.

At the same time, the mention of Zechariah and Elizabeth (1:5-7), in contrast, draws attention to God's 'little people'. As one of thousands of priests, Zechariah shared considerable spiritual status: he was part of a hereditary lineage set apart by God, served a central role in temple worship and sacrifice, had special access to the temple holy places, offered God's blessing to the people, and instructed them in Scripture. His piety was not merely formal, but also personal: he and Elizabeth were righteous before God, and lived blamelessly. Still, they had no child, a

disappointment in most cultures at most times, and a special cause for shame in the first century.

As God acts to free the nation of Israel from political and religious oppression, he also frees Zechariah and Elizabeth from personal stigma and sorrow (1:11-13). This is a recurring pattern with God: he brought the nation of Israel into existence through the birth of Isaac to the old and barren Abraham and Sarah (Gen 18); he delivered Israel from its enemies through the birth of Samson to the barren Manoah and wife (Judg 13:2-3), he introduced the kingship to Israel through the birth of Samuel to the barren Elkanah and Hannah (1 Sam 1-2). So it is no surprise that he would introduce the culmination of Israel's hopes and history through the birth of John to his old and barren parents. The pattern serves as assurance to us also, that our God who superintends geo-political big issues, cares no less for our lower-level concerns and disappointments, including the inability to conceive.

### **Day Three: Luke 1:26-38 The conception of Jesus**

John the Baptist is important in his own right. His name – John, 'God is gracious' – is especially assigned by God (1:13), in the pattern of Ishmael (Gen 16:11), Isaac (Gen 17:19), and the coming king Immanuel (Isa 7:14). His lifestyle is especially devout, adhering to a Nazirite vow (1:15), like Samson of old (Judg 13:3-6). He will be filled with the Spirit *in utero* (1:15), surpassing the credentials of Ezekiel (3:12,14; 11:24; 36:26-27), and anticipating the coming Servant promised in Isaiah (11:2; 42:1; 61:1).

But beyond his own importance, his special significance lies in what – in whom – he anticipates and introduces. John's conception is announced by Gabriel (1:19), the same angel who appeared to Daniel to foretell the days when the Messiah would come to deliver Jerusalem from foreign oppression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for wickedness (Dan 9:21,24). John comes as

an Elijah-figure calling the people to repentance, preparing for the coming of the Lord (1:16-17), in fulfillment of the prediction by Malachi (3:1-6; 4:1-6). John's birth is 'good news' (1:19), the very expression that Isaiah used to proclaim the coming salvation and the coming Savior (Isa 40:9; 52:7; 61:1).

Luke underscores the connection between John and Jesus: the same angel announces the conception of each (1:19 cf 26); each announcement contains the same elements in essentially the same language (1:12 cf 1:28; 1:13 cf 1:30; 1:13 cf 1:31; 1:15 cf 1:32; 1:18 cf 1:34; 1:19 cf. 1:26; 1:19 cf 1:35; 1:20 cf 1:36); and the pregnancy of Elizabeth serves as confirmation of the promise to Mary (1:36).

In the midst of all these continuities, what stands out more is the discontinuities, in particular, the superiority of Jesus: John is filled with the Spirit from conception (1:15), while Jesus is conceived by the Spirit (1:35); John will be like Elijah (1:17), while Jesus will be the Son of God (1:32); John will call people back to the Lord (1:16-17), while Jesus will reign over them (1:33, citing 2 Sam 7:11-16); John bears witness to Jesus even *in utero* (1:44), and Elizabeth honors Mary (1:42-45).

Luke's intent in the story of Jesus' conception is clear. He heaps up allusions to the high-points and heroes of the Old Testament, and to John the Baptist, Jesus' illustrious contemporary. All this points in a single direction: God is doing something special, something more spectacular even than the covenant with Abraham or the enthronement of King David. The babe to be born will fulfill the climactic promises of the Old Testament; he will free Israel from both oppression and sin; he will bring Israel back to God and into salvation (1:32-33).

This is so familiar that it is hard for us to capture the excitement of this birth narrative, or its world-altering ramifications. Still, we can worship Jesus: as king forever and Lord of all, as the category-

defying incarnate Son of God (1:35), and as the fulfillment of all God's promises.

#### **Day Four: Luke 1:39-56 Jesus' mother worships**

Emotion calls forth music, whether it be the joy of new love and a couple identifying 'our song', or the misery of a bereavement accompanied by a somber funeral dirge.

Yet Mary's song represents something bigger than emotional expression. Within the Old Testament, at crucial times of salvation history, when God intervened powerfully to rescue his people, they worshipped him: Moses (Exod 15:1-18; Deut 32), Deborah (Judg 5:1-31), David (1 Chron 16:8-36), and Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10). So Mary's song is another anticipation of the great deliverance that God is about to achieve, on the order of the redemption from Egypt, preservation in the wilderness, or elevation of a king to the throne of Israel.

Her song has two parts. First, she worships God for what he has done for her personally, in conceiving the coming king (1:46-49). Then she worships God for what he does for his people as a whole, showing mercy and providing deliverance from their oppressors (1:50-51). Both sections affirm the portrait of God which runs throughout this Gospel: God favors the socially insignificant ('humble') and the impoverished ('hungry') (1:48,52-53). All this he does in fulfillment of his promises to Israel.

What does this say to us, who are mostly neither oppressed, nor peasants, nor impoverished, nor Jews? At the very least, it reminds us that the promises are not ours to claim. Nonetheless we are recipients of his mercy and his deliverance. While familiar, this calls for our gratitude. And it implicitly invites us to join God in his concern for the powerless, the poor, and the outsider.

## **Day Five: Luke 1:57-80 John's father worships**

Zechariah follows suit and worships God. His song also breaks down into two parts, though not the pattern of 'me – everyone' that structured Mary's song. Instead, Zechariah first praises God for rescuing Israel (1:68-75), and then turns to his own son's role in the process (1:76-79).

Like most in his time, Zechariah's focus is on Israel's suffering under political and military domination by Rome (1:68-75). But like the prophets of old, he attributes this oppression not to the superior might of their oppressors, but to God's abandonment of his people in punishment for their sin. And so their rescue will come about as the newborn John plays his God-appointed role of prophet, proclaiming mercy, forgiveness, and salvation through the coming Lord (1:76-79).

Delineation of John's role mattered among Christians in the first century, because John was a famous prophet with his own followers, and a folk hero known and admired throughout the nation, even a generation after his death. John is important, the New Testament affirms; only one person is more important. Still, he does not actually save anyone; he is a prophet, proclaiming the salvation which God offers.

Given that we have no inclination to idolize John the Baptist over Jesus, what relevance does this text have for us? It again reminds us of the blessings which we have in Christ, though we were not originally entitled to them: mercy, forgiveness, and salvation. Though this is familiar, it is appropriate for us to take time to meditate on these blessings, and to thank God again for them.

The account of John's birth and his ministry role also reminds us not to elevate contemporary spiritual leaders. In America, ministry tends to be personality-driven, marked by celebrity pastors and worship leaders. None who ever lived was as great as

John the Baptist; but he was nothing more than a pointer to Jesus.

**Day Six: Luke 1:18-20,34-38 Role models, good and not-good**

In a legitimate eagerness to apply Scripture to our lives, we must beware of making it all about us, and especially about how we must live in obedience to God.

Luke 1 is primarily about Jesus: who he was, the extraordinary wonders surrounding his birth, how he was conceived, and what role he would play in salvation history, in the history of Israel, and in our individual lives. Our primary application, then, is to worship Jesus for who he was, how he was conceived, and what role he plays in God's interactions with us. (Incidentally, this response adheres with Core Value #1 'God-centered, not self-centered'.)

Nonetheless, Luke clearly includes a secondary look at the contrasting responses of Zechariah and Mary to Gabriel's revelations. In the face of improbability (and despite the precedent of Abraham and Sarah), Zechariah responds with incredulity: how can a barren woman and an old man conceive (1:18)? In the face of impossibility, Mary responds with puzzlement: how can a virgin conceive (1:34)? Because of his doubt, Zechariah is disciplined with muteness (1:20). Because of her trust in God, Mary is commended, even by Zechariah's own wife (1:38,45)!

Certainly Luke intends us to respond to the promises of God with the trust of Mary rather than the doubts of Zechariah. But only where God has actually promised.

Are there promises in Scripture that you struggle to trust? While we want to be careful not to make false claims, have you received personal promises from God that you struggle to trust?