



Luke 1:1-25
The Gift of Good News in Luke
“His Name Will Be...John?”

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December 1st, 2024
1st Sunday in Advent

Pray. Today we begin our Advent sermon series that will take us through Christmas Eve and the end of December. And for the next month we are going to be in the passages that record for us the birth of Jesus and the various events around it and people who were part of it, as told in the Gospel According to Luke. My hope is that through this series of messages you, and the people you invite to join you on an upcoming Sunday or Christmas eve, will be encouraged in your faith and stay centered on Jesus in a time of the year when there are lots of distractions due to the commercialization of Christmas. So, today we dive into the first 25 verses of Luke 1. It’s a bit of a long passage, and we will read it a few verses at a time this morning, starting with **verses 1-4**. This is all God’s word to you and me this morning...

In today’s world, with social media spreading anything that someone claims is true, “Fact-checking” has become a common phrase. **Luke, writing in the early 60’s A.D., did his own fact-checking make sure that what he wrote was true and accurate.** Luke was a partner of the Apostle Paul’s, and also a doctor, which we know from Colossians 4:14. Their medical capabilities might not have been anywhere near what we have today, but accuracy and fact-finding certainly would have been valued by him. And so, what we see in these opening verses is a report of what he did to fact-check the life of Jesus.

Some is what had been handed down from eyewitnesses and servants of the word. These are people who knew Jesus, who heard him talk, who walked with him, who were at the events recorded in his account. “Servants” calls to mind people who became disciples of Jesus and carried out his mission. Perhaps Luke talked to some of the 12 disciples, and certainly others who became servants of the gospel who were eyewitnesses to Jesus. And so, he has done his fact-checking, and now is writing down this “orderly” account of the life of Jesus. Notice, he’s not writing this expecting it to be shared around the world like a social media post: it’s a letter to his friend, Theophilus, to share what he’s learned, to help him understand and have confidence in Jesus and encourage his faith. Let’s continue with **verses 5-7**.

So: **Now we're introduced to Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth.** He's a Jewish priest. Both live honorable and godly lives – observing all the religious rules and decrees “blamelessly” as Luke puts it. This is not to say they were without sin, of course. It's simply his way of emphasizing that you just don't find better, more faithful servants of God than you do these two. Humble, salt-of-the earth types of people. And they're old. In fact, they're “very old.” They're at least...well...I'm not gonna name an age so I don't upset anyone. They're older than me, though, and each of you probably thinks they're older than you 😊. They also are childless. In their day and culture, their childlessness would have been a bit shameful; in fact in verse 25 Elizabeth says it has been a “disgrace”. Plus, they would likely be concerned about who was going to care for them as they continued to age. So, this is a multi-faceted problem in their lives. We'll come back to this later. Let's continue on in **verses 8-17** now.

So: **The priests would take turns ministering at the temple, with different groups of priests ministering for a week at a time, from Sabbath to Sabbath.** They would lead people in worship, offer sacrifices, pray with the people, and so forth. And one of them would be chosen to go into an inner part of the temple, and burn incense at the Altar of Incense, while the people and the other priests would remain outside praying. So that's what's going on in the first few verses here: Zechariah is on duty with his priestly division, and he is chosen to go into the temple to light the incense.

While he's in there, an angel of the Lord comes to him with this message that he and Elizabeth will conceive, they're to name him John, and he's going to be a great leader of God's people, bringing people into relationship with God, and helping people be prepared for the Lord. So, **John is a forerunner to something big that God is going to do.**

Now, if you've never read this passage before, but know enough about the Christian faith to realize that Jesus is the centerpiece of Christianity, and his birth that we celebrate at Christmas, then you might be saying, “John? His name is John? Isn't this supposed to be about Jesus?” It's a bit surprising, perhaps. But John (comes to be known as John the Baptist) is going to

prepare the way for Jesus. And in particular, his ministry is going to be similar to that of Elijah's.

Verse 17 says John will go before the Lord “in the spirit and power of Elijah and will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children...” It might be a bit puzzling for us. Elijah was one of the great prophets of Israel that we read about in the Old Testament, primarily in the books of 1 and 2 Kings. He doesn't have an Old Testament book named after him, but he's still one of the most heralded and respected prophets of old. And he's known, in part, for pretty directly and fervently calling out idol-worship and sin in Israel.

And then we read about him again in the book of Malachi, **“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents...” (Malachi 4:5-6)**. Now, this is written at about 430 B.C., which was a few hundred years *after* Elijah lived. So, it doesn't mean Elijah literally (though some Jews believed that), but one who is like him; another person who resembles Elijah and his ministry will come before the day of the Lord to prepare people for this thing that God will do. And so, the angel is saying that John is the fulfillment of this prophetic word from 430 years earlier, and we see that his ministry had very similar themes to that of Elijah, calling out sin, and calling people to repentance. Let's continue reading the last few verses, **18-25**.

These verses again describe some unusual things like we have in the previous verses – namely, Zechariah losing his voice, and also Elizabeth remaining in seclusion for 5 months. The loss of voice is a consequence for Zechariah's unbelief at the angel Gabriel's announcement; while unusual, the dots are connected for us. But **Elizabeth's solitude is a bit of a mystery**. There was no Old Testament mandate for it; there's no cultural reason for it. It could be that because of her older age she wanted to avoid some of the speculation from others until it was obvious that yes, she is pregnant; it could be that she made some kind of personal vow or act of devotion, almost like a sabbatical; maybe she had strong bouts of morning sickness as sometimes happens in the first trimester or two, and so she had to just stay home for those months.

Even though there's some mystery there, there's much we can take from this passage and apply to our lives. So let's talk about what it means for us and how God can use this to shape us as disciples of Jesus who are making disciples of Jesus. Remember, **Jesus trains up 12 guys as his core group of disciples, there were others he trained up along the way as well, and then he sends them out to make more of Jesus' disciples. And because that mission was established and carried out, you and I are here.** So how might God use this passage today not only to work *in* us and our discipleship to Jesus, but also work *through* us to impact someone else and lead them toward Jesus? There are four things I want to highlight. Maybe one or two of these will resonate and stick with you today.

First, Luke is telling us in the opening verses that not only is this good news – remember, “Gospel”, as in “The Gospel According to Luke” (the Euangelion according to Luke) means “good news”... So: **First, not only is it good news, Luke is also saying it's trustworthy news.** Luke has done his homework. He did the research. He took what was handed down, fact-checked it, and recorded it so that Theophilus, and now us, can have reliable information on which to base our faith.

Second, we see that God is faithful in adversity. Elizabeth and Zechariah, felt disgraced because of their lack of children. Maybe you've felt like a disgrace in your family or your community or place of work. Or maybe you've got some other adversity in your life: a toxic work environment, a financial crisis, or your college football team got annihilated yesterday...sorry, that's not Biblically important. Whatever you're struggling with, God is with you in the midst of that and will bring you through it. As **Lamentations 3:23** says, “**His mercies are new every morning, great is his faithfulness.**” This is part of the hope that we have in Jesus, that we remember on this first Sunday in Advent. So, when adversity comes, lean into the Lord through Scripture and prayer, and lean into his community, the church. And by the way, we see here that adversity hits people in all walks of life. As a priest, Zechariah was educated, and in a revered and respected position. And yet he and Elizabeth still had this sense of being a disgrace in

the community. But God is faithful, sustaining them and ultimately bringing them through to a place of joy.

Third, in his sovereignty, God sets his people apart to share the good news, to be a light to the world, to point people to Jesus. If I were to make this a one-point sermon, this would be the one point, so I want to camp out here for a bit longer. This is the most overarching theme in this passage. John is chosen, even before he's born, for a very specific task in regards to Jesus' life and ministry. Zechariah and Elizabeth do as well, and many others also, as we'll see in the coming weeks. But it's not just people from the first century A.D. in that part of the world, because God's not done. You and I, right here, are now part of the story God is writing. And just as he did in this passage, he's sovereignly calling you and me to do things according to his purposes, to carry out his vision for salvation to all the earth through Jesus. **You and I are also divinely set apart for ministry in the name of Jesus.** Maybe, like the announcement that they're going to have a baby and name him John, this is surprising to you. But it's true: you are part of God's Jesus-centered mission.

It starts with worship. **When you're here and you participate in worship with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, you minister to others and lead them toward Jesus.** I was reminded this week of the true story from 1991 of Jerry Sittser, a professor at Whitworth University, whose mom, wife, and one of his kids was killed in a car crash when their car was hit by a drunk driver. After that, he said he couldn't really engage in worship at church for quite some time. He would go, but he just couldn't engage in it...which is completely understandable...but the people around him as they worshipped God strengthened and encouraged him and carried him along. He needed the faith of others to encourage his faith. Your worship encourages others and leads them into the presence of Jesus.

For those of you who've gotten in the habit of watching online but could otherwise be here in person (and I know some of you can only watch online due to health concerns or you're out of the area...I'm not talking about those situations)...but for those of you who *could* be here, I want you to know: we miss you. Your presence here would encourage us much more than the

statistic of the service being viewed online one more time does. And you might think you don't miss us, but I do believe you'd be more encouraged in your faith as well if you were here. From that place of worship, we grow through intentional discipleship processes like small groups and daily devotionals and so forth; and then finally, we really live into this divine calling as we serve and lead people toward Jesus. Jesus did not start a volunteer organization; he started a discipleship movement that leads us to a place of service as part of our discipleship to Him. So, you are divinely called to be part of God's Jesus-centered mission of redemption, just as we see God divinely working through the people in today's passage.

Fourth, we learn: Don't doubt God - especially when it comes to God's plan for your life to be part of what he's doing to bring the Good News of Jesus into the world. Zechariah doubted and it cost him his voice for the duration of the pregnancy. Maybe that was a blessing to Elizabeth, I don't know...But the lesson is clear: don't doubt God when he's calling you to do something for his glory and for the sake of the gospel. Trust him. He's faithful. He's got a plan. As Romans 8:28 says, **“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).** God *is* calling you. He is calling you to be part of what he's doing. Don't doubt that God can work through you.

So, just to recap and wrap this up: The Gospel of Jesus is trustworthy; God is faithful; God sovereignly calls you and me to participate in his Jesus-centered mission; and don't doubt God about any of that. This Advent and beyond let's move forward together as disciples of Jesus: filled with hope as we worship, grow in faith, and live into God's sovereign mission and calling to lead people toward Jesus. Let's pray...Amen.