

Luke 1:5-25

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[0 : 00] Again, the text is Luke chapter 1, verses 5 through 25, page 831. Would you please rise with me for the reading of God's Word? In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah of the division of Aviyah.

And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. 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.

[1 : 15] And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 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.

And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. 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.

And Zechariah said to the angel, How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years. And the angel answered him, I am Gabriel.

I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. 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.

And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple.

[2 : 26] And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days, his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me to take away my reproach among people.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, I think I am on fairly safe ground in claiming that the nine families who live closest to my own in proximity, counting one beside me, five who share a building with me, and three who live immediately behind me, only three will celebrate Christmas in a belief that Jesus is God's promised King.

In other words, six of the nine do in all likelihood either reject it or, as of today, are uncommitted to the biblical story of Advent joy.

I wonder if you had to tally up the nine who live closest to you, how many celebrate Christmas as the Bible purports.

Now, I don't claim to know all the reasons behind the rejection of the two-thirds, at least in my neighborhood, but I do know this, that the traditional way of handling Luke's rendering of Christmas is killing us.

[4 : 22] Think about it. The Christian church's choice of Lucan texts over the past 20 years or so is highly selective. We gravitate to two texts, both of an incredible nature.

First, the annunciation of the birth of the Christ child to a young virgin. And if you have Luke open, you could see that in verses 26 to 38, chapter 1.

The second story that we traditionally talk about is the annunciation, excuse me, the vast heavenly host that lights up the sky over Bethlehem where shepherds keep their watch over flock by night.

Chapter 2, verses 8 to 21. But for my neighbors, and I expect for some of yours, coming along with friends or family into Christian churches at this time of year and hearing only those two treasured stories in isolation from the rest of Luke's Christmas, it can't help but leave them with the sense that the Christian religion is the stuff of myth or legend.

It's fantastical, but not true. It's without credibility. It fails to pass any logical test of plausibility.

[5 : 58] It doesn't have the mental stamina that would lead them to return, let alone convert to what is called our most holy faith.

That said, I wonder if we simply attended to Luke's Christmas telling on his own terms, if things might be different.

I thought this week of Luke barging in into churches all over the globe, saying, Stop! Stop! Do Christmas the way I did it, please!

He gave us eight Christmas narratives, not two, and with intention in its sequence.

Things might be different for us for our neighbors or perhaps even for those of you who are here today who find yourself listening to this sermon in an uncommitted state.

[7 : 02] You are uncommitted today on the Christian faith. what I want to do in the next three or four weeks, Pastor Jackson and myself, is to do Luke according to Luke rather than according to our love of sentiment.

And it requires us first to remember that these narratives in Luke really are the fullness of chapter 1, verse 1, all the way through. Turn it over and you'll see pages of writing at least until chapter 2, verse 40.

And if you include his childhood scene in the temple all the way to 3.1, you are still in the very early years of Christ.

The first of which introduces us to Zechariah and Elizabeth and the birth, interestingly, not of Jesus, but of John the Baptist.

Now, from this narrative on Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John the Baptist, chapter 1, verse 5 through 25, I want to highlight four features that I think are doing Luke according to Luke.

[8 : 17] And the first of the four in today's message centers around Luke's concern for historical credibility. This is the very thing that our handling of Luke often undermines.

take a look at how verse 5 begins. It says, Luke writes for you, put your eyes on it, in the days of Herod, king of Judea. What an interesting way to start the Christmas narrative.

Herod, the great king of Judea, undisputedly an historical figure that you can learn much about from writings outside of the Bible.

In fact, we know for certainty when his reign began, when it ended. We know of the lineage that came forth from him.

We know of the role that they would play in first century Palestine. we can read about him from the likes of historians in the first century.

[9 : 32] That Luke would open his Christmas narrative with that kind of historical marker is significant. Luke's accounting of the origins of the Christian faith is intentionally crafted to assure you, his reader, that from the earliest moments of Christianity, it is a faith that is grounded in the firm realities of human history in the days of Herod, king of Judea.

From the writer's perspective, what he is about to tell us then is not in the genre of myth or legend.

He does not begin once upon a time. Or let me tell you a story. He writes, in the days of Herod, king of Judea.

This isn't the only time that Luke presses home this primary point of historical credibility. Take a look at chapter 2 and verses 1 and 2.

you are still firmly fixed in the Christmas narratives. And Luke writes, in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

[10 : 59] Verse 2 is especially enlightening. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. He is marking the origins of the Christian faith within the context of human history.

He does it again in chapter 3 and verse 1. In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea and Herod being Tetrarch of Galilee and his brother Philip Tetrarch of the region of Ithraea and Traconitis and further words that I'll have to learn by the time we get there.

During those days, in fact, in that very year. Now, I just want to stop on that. This first feature of rooting the Christmas narrative in history is important.

Not all religions do this. They don't have the same concern. Earlier this week, I went back and read great portions of the Quran, something I would commend to you.

But in reading those portions, one thing becomes strikingly clear. A different picture regarding religious conviction and human history is put forward.

[12 : 34] The Quran almost appears to be ahistorical. It is strictly, by that I mean, in a limited sense, a book of religious dogma.

It is almost entirely unconnected from human history. Sure, there's an occasional reference to the Jews or to a figure like Moses, but there is nothing, nothing, of the sort of thing that we've been looking at here in Luke.

The Christian faith is unique in this sense. It claims to be the sort of faith where God interfaces with humanity in ways that are real, tangible, and connected to the world and its events and, if you give it its claims, God's plans for everyone.

Now, don't hear me wrong, history doesn't save you, the gospel saves you. But believe me, a gospel that is rooted in history is certainly to rise in its level of credibility.

So knowing this, this is the way our story starts. Christmas starts in the days of Herod, king of Judea. Your confidence then in what you were reading starts to gain what could only be called solid footing.

[14 : 20] In fact, take a look at his introduction in chapter 1 verses 1 to 4. There is a word in verse 4 that I want to just pause on for a moment. He claims to be writing with the intention verse 4 that you, that is Theophilus, either an individual by that name, meaning a lover of God, or symbolically those who love God, he's writing that you would have and here's the word certainty concerning the things literally that you have been catechized in, things that you have been taught.

His intention in writing is to put solid footing beneath you so that your faith has a degree of certainty. Now the word for certainty in verse 4 sounds like this, Ashphileia, which is a word from which we get something like asphalt, the hard road.

I am writing so that you would not not be tripped up, but that you would have something firm underneath you concerning that which you had been taught so that you would not think that the Christian faith is a stuff of myth or legend.

Luke is, from his introduction, self-confessed historian of a careful and sober sort.

So the first feature of hearing Luke on his own terms is what you just might call street cred. Christmas cred in the days of Herod, king of Judea.

[16 : 18] Now let me mention a second feature of Luke, according to Luke, that I found interesting this week. Verses 5 to 7. The second feature of Luke's telling of the Christmas story, in contrast to the way we normally use him, is the surprise that he doesn't begin, with an angelic visitation to a young virgin.

But rather, that our childbearer, that is in the text that was read today, is a much older woman named Elizabeth, who happens to be suffering through her final childbearing years without ever having conceived or given birth.

That's astounding. Luke, give me Christmas. Let me tell you about an old woman. who would never conceive. Now, why is this surprise important?

Well, while it might come as a surprise to us, to Theophilus and the early readers, this would have been essential if the subsequent narratives were to be believed.

in other words, this kind of pregnancy was necessary because whenever God was at work doing a new thing in the world, He did so through old women who hadn't given birth, not young ones who were betrothed and not yet even married.

[17 : 56] If you're not familiar with the historical record or the biblical record, I just encourage you to go back into the Genesis account and see what is said of a woman named Sarah.

Sarah. Or you could run forward to the wife of Manoah in the days of the judges who becomes the mother of Samson.

Or the prototypical one, Hannah, wife of Elkanah, who in her barren state, after many years of not being able to give birth, gives birth to one named Samuel, the great anointer of the kings.

All throughout the biblical record, when God does something new, He does it through an elderly woman who had been through years of isolation and the inability to give birth.

So in our text, it is the aged Elizabeth who the text says in verse 7, was advanced in years, not Mary.

[19 : 20] And therefore, it increases the plausibility of the Christmas story for any who would read Luke on his own terms. Imagine, if you didn't have this story, well, you'd have a God of Christmas who works entirely differently than the God of the Hebrew narrative and the entire expectation that he has built up, he would have walked away from and the plausibility of the story would fall with it.

Third, the third feature of Luke's first Christmas narrative that should make the reader take his material seriously deals not so much with the kind of person that Christmas begins with this elderly woman, but rather the place from which God speaks to announce the news and plan of salvation.

Take a look at verses 8 to 15. Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense, that is, Zechariah.

And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense, and there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

Notice the particularity of the language. Not merely somewhere, but in the temple standing at the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.

[20 : 58] And here comes the angelic announcement. The language of the angel takes you from 13 all the way through, but the angel said to him, do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John, and you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 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.

Notice, the angel comes to the glorious temple in Jerusalem, not to some insignificant hill outside the gates of O ye little town of Bethlehem.

He comes to the temple. The annunciation that sets off Luke's Christmas is made not to a carpenter, nor to a young virgin, but to the very kind of person we would expect it to be made, namely a priest, and a priest who had married immediately to the line of Aaron, to the mediating family, the one in the Old Testament through whom God spoke.

all his words before the people. I find this just fascinating. He comes to the very place that he must come if the Christian faith of ours is to be viscerally connected to Old Testament history and to a sense of viable plausibility.

Now, if you're unfamiliar with the biblical record in the Old Testament, you need to know this. God began speaking regularly to his people from something called a tabernacle, which was this portable house or tent that Moses and his people carried through the wilderness.

[23 : 12] Later, under the auspices of David and the construction of Solomon, that portable tabernacle where God spoke became a temple. And if you were to read the account of Ezekiel the prophet, you will find that God stopped speaking because of the sins of his people, and there's a dramatic closure to the relationship between heavens and the earth where the Spirit of God actually comes up off of the temple and to the far gate of the city of Jerusalem and then back out over the hills and then is gone.

And he's gone for centuries. He doesn't speak. even though you have the return, and you can read, of course, these narratives in the post-exilic writings of a reconstruction of a temple, but it falters and fails.

But at the time of Jesus' birth, or at the time of our own narrative, Herod the Great, in an effort to placate the Jews and to politically get along in Jerusalem, accessed numbers of funds so that an actual temple would be built.

It was called Herod's Temple. That is the temple that Jesus himself would walk into as a twelve-year-old and later as an adult. And from that temple, Zechariah hears the word of the Lord from the right side of the altar of incense.

God, from the very beginning, spoke from this place, fulfilled in the temple, and now again here. It lends to my way of thinking, credibility to the story.

[25 : 03] When you have Christmas, you do not have something that is unconnected with all of God's previous revelations, where you would have it without this narrative included.

God, commencing something new in continuity with his plans of old. Fourth, the fourth feature of Luke, according to Luke, in this narrative, is the child.

This is a final fascinating feature of Luke's first Christmas narrative. It isn't about Jesus at all. Oh! Luke wants you to know, you can't have Christmas unless you're going to talk about two births, the Baptist and the Christ child.

And you better talk about the Baptist first, because without the Baptist, this birth does not matter. Well, he gives birth to one named John.

Well, she does, I should say. Luke does. Take a look at the nuanced description of the one that is to be born.

[26 : 28] Chapter 1, verses 16 and 17. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of their fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

Now, if you read that without any context of where the Old Testament ended, this would mean little to you. But it is pregnant with meaning that the most significant birth to come at the close of the Old Testament record as we have it in the English text Malachi ending last, is the birth of one like Elijah, and the language of that birth is nearly identical with the words given by the angel to Zechariah.

Take a look back. Look at how the Bibles as we have them close. Malachi chapter 4. I want you to just put your eyes on verses 5 and 6 and connect them to what we just read in verses 16 and 17.

This is the way the Old Testament ends. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day that the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.

Don't give me Christmas without the Baptist or utter destruction is what is leveled. The angel says to him in verse 17 that he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children.

[28 : 17] He will come in the power of Elijah. The child, the Baptist. We could turn also to Isaiah 40 verses 1 to 5 although we won't about the one who was promised who would come to prepare the way of the Lord.

For if you had the Lord on his own terms the day was done. Repentance was incapable. Forgiveness would be forfeited. Salvation would be lost.

Praise God for John. Let me tell you how elevated Luke puts it. Take a look back in Luke now.

Chapter 1 verse 19 or so. He says I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. You know what the word good news is there?

The gospel. I'm giving you the gospel. John is coming. John is coming. Just as the prophetic discourse said he must if salvation was to be ours rather than judgment.

[29 : 34] Thank God that at least Luke did Christmas according to Luke. And look what it brings.

Look at the consequence of his advent. I'm talking about the Baptist here. His advent, his coming, his arrival. Chapter 1 verse 14.

You will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth. And so it is.

And so it must be. Herod the king, historical credibility, the older woman, the person of predictability, the temple, the absolute place of necessity, the Baptist, without whom, without the gospel of his birth, no mediating salvation to come.

The only sad moment in the whole text, and I close with this, is that Zachariah himself didn't believe it.

[31 : 09] Couldn't get his mind around it. And as a consequence, he was limited. God shut him up.

As he opened the womb of his wife, he closed him down for a time, unable to herald the advent of joy.

Don't be like Zachariah God. I don't know where the nine neighbors that live closest to you will be this month.

Most likely they won't be at Christmas on the town, although I hope some will be. I don't know how many of you here today are uncommitted, but I hope you're more willing to read the story with a sense of credibility.

But most of all, I hope your mouths are better equipped to speak to your friends and family the message of Christmas in a way that will gain a hearing in the world.

[32 : 39] Our Heavenly Father, we commit this word to you and to the strength of our souls and for the sure footing of our faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.