

Luke 1:5–25

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[0 : 00] 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. 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.

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.

[1 : 09] 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.

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.

[2 : 27] This is the word of the Lord. Our Heavenly Father, as we look now at your word, I pray that it would be attended by the strength and clarity of the Holy Spirit, that the message we believe would be embraced again with greater strength, that we would be saved and strengthened.

In Jesus' name, Amen. I was probably about seven. Put you back in about 1968, when I was determined on Christmas Eve to discover what was admissible to the story and what was credible to the story.

So I left my room after having gone to bed, my parents thinking I was asleep, and I snuck down the hallway, as some of you seven-year-olds know how to do, and I tucked myself in behind the couch to see if Santa Claus was admissible to the story and therefore credible to my belief.

And I waited. Unfortunately, my parents had placed this couch along a wall that had forced air heating.

And the vent, which brought air into the living room, was directly behind the sofa. And it didn't take long for that hot air to just make me woozy.

[4 : 25] And it got so hot that I crawled back out from behind the couch, limped my way back into my bed, and didn't know that year, about 1968, whether Santa Claus was to be admitted to the story or part of its credibility.

I've grown since then. But the question in regard to what's credible about Christmas or what is to be admissible in Christmas remains.

I'm old enough now where I've seen a generation from the mid-80s to the mid-90s where Christmas itself was subject to a movement to make it inadmissible to the whole season.

We moved from Merry Christmas to Happy Holidays. But more recently, the movement is back.

Cresches are not normally being taken away from city halls. In fact, you can go down to Daly Plaza and there is the creche. Christmas is, at least as a message, credible to the season.

[5 : 49] Luke writes a gospel. St. Luke the Evangelist with one aim in mind to strengthen the credibility of the story that you might know what's admissible and why is it credible.

You can see it there in chapter 1, verse 4. He writes that you may have certainty concerning the things you've been taught.

The word certainty sounds like ashphileia. It's where we might get something called asphalt.

He writes to put hard road under your feet. No need to get behind the couch. Read him and discover for yourself what's credible.

In this respect, I love where he begins. He has eight narratives or so that could be rightly called Christmas narratives. But look where he begins.

[7 : 04] verse 5. In the days of Herod, king of Judea, he begins with a marker of historical credibility.

Very first word out of his mouth. I want to tell you about Jesus. Where do I begin in history? Not some fanciful, mythological folklore.

No. What I have to say concerning what is credible about Christmas begins by an appeal to the days of Herod, king of Judea.

It's a wonderful thing. We know who this Herod the Great was. He was a historical figure. Luke's message centers around that idea of credibility.

We know when his reign began. We know when his reign ended. And you don't need to appeal to the Bible story to determine it. We can read people like Josephus, others, to learn about him.

[8 : 11] And when Luke opens up his Christmas faith narrative, he intentionally crafts it to convince the reader that Christianity, unlike other religions, well, it begins in history.

And it's rooted in history. Take a look at chapter 2, 1. When he gets to another Christmas narrative, how does he begin? In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus.

And then it goes on to tell you who the governor was and where he governed. Take a look at chapter 3 in verse 1. Luke puts forward what is admissible and credible.

And at each juncture, he tells you, it's historical. I don't know what you think this year about the Christmas story. But Luke would put that road underneath you.

knowing this has an effect. We know that we're reading the work of someone who was a careful historian, who had done his research, accumulated his note cards, as it were, in the old days, written down his primary sources, and now was gathering it together for our welfare.

[9 : 41] Do you believe in Christmas? That is, the birth of Christ as God's Savior King? An appeal to history would help. I pray that it would help you today.

Another fascinating thing about our text, notice where he begins Christmas, with an older woman. Look at the latter half of verse 5 all the way through 7.

There was a priest named Zechariah, although he doesn't receive the attention here in verses 5 to 7, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

And they were both righteous before God, while 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.

This is the second argument concerning the credibility of Christmas. Not only is it historically reliable, but the second feature here, in contrast to what we normally use Luke for, there is no angelic visit to a young virgin girl by the name of Mary.

[10 : 49] That's not where this story starts, says Luke. It starts where one would expect it to start, if the record were true.

with an older woman who had difficulty bearing children, who actually gave birth to a deliverer, and one who would speak of the righteousness of God.

That is in continuity with the way God always worked. Think of it. Sarah, in the Genesis narrative. It's the older woman who had trouble bearing that is an indicator for the reader that God is up to something unique.

Think of it with the wife of Manoah in the last days of the judges, mother of Samson. Think of it with Hannah, wife of Elkanah, who bore Samuel in her old age.

they all attest to this fact that when God does something in the world that is necessary and a movement toward deliverance, you can expect Him to be involved in the life of an elderly woman.

[12 : 12] And therefore, it's credible. Don't begin the Christmas story with His appearance to the young virgin.

Lest you think in your heart that's fanciful, mythological, impossible. Luke says, let me set the record straight.

It's historically reliable and it's in continuity with the older woman that demonstrates even this message should be admissible.

It's plausible. His message is more plausible just by verses 5-7. Pastor Helen, why do you believe in Christmas? Why do you believe that Jesus really was born?

Well, the indicator is that something happened to an old woman that paved the way for righteous belief.

[13 : 13] Third, where does it begin? not over the fields of Bethlehem, but where?

We're in the temple. Look at verses 8-10. Now, while he was serving as a 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. This is the third feature of Luke's first Christmas narrative that makes every reader take his material seriously.

Christmas begins with where God would normally be expected to speak from. When God shows up, he doesn't show up indiscriminately.

He had promised at the time all the way back of the Exodus that he would minister his delivering presence to his people from the tabernacle from which he would dwell with his people, speak with his people, and mediate a relationship through blood with his people.

[14 : 29] And that tabernacle became a temple. And when that temple was destroyed, it needed to be rebuilt. And by this very time, Herod, a political figure, had actually orchestrated with religious entities in his community, the Jews, to rebuild what would have been Herod's temple.

And to this temple, to this temple, God comes. He doesn't begin anywhere else than where you would expect him to begin if this indeed is going to be the way God works in the world.

Lending greater credibility to the temple. He comes to the glorious temple in Jerusalem. We're not outside the gates of, oh, little town of Bethlehem.

the annunciation that sets off Luke's Christmas is made not with a carpenter from Nazareth, not with a young virgin living on the outskirts, but to the very one we should expect the announcement to be made.

I have something to say, says God. I go to the temple from which I have promised to speak, says God, and I communicate it to a priest through whom, from the beginning, I orchestrate my word.

[15 : 55] It's credible. Lends plausibility. Imagine, here's God having not spoken for centuries.

Now he's going to commence something new. And he's going to claim that it's going to be in continuity as a fulfillment of things old. Well, doesn't it make sense then that he would pick up right where he left off?

And indeed, says Luke, he does. Three points so far to what should be admissible or credible concerning Christmas. It's historically rooted.

With the older women, it acts with continuity with what we expect when we see deliverance. Even the geographic place from which he comes, all of this lends it.

and now look at even a fourth one, the angelic announcement. Verses 12 to 17. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him.

[17 : 02] I'm sorry, verse 11. 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. 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. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit of the 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.

The emphasis of the text, this angelic announcement. The fact that he comes to an angel is important. In our day, interestingly, people outside the family of faith give more credence generally to the existence of angels than those inside the family of faith.

Now, there are some who merely wear an angel as a trinket, but some of my good friends in our very neighborhood here, who don't attend any church at all, do hold to the existence of an angel, and that God does have an angel that watches over the affairs of man.

[18 : 35] But when you actually walk into the community of faith, what's so ironic is we've so downplayed any understanding of supernatural beings outside of our own existence.

We've become so literally, philosophically, materially rooted that we're not sure that they even exist. But in Luke's day, and in the culture in our own day, there's general agreement in belief belief that an angelic host exists, that the spirit world is comprised of beings.

In the first century, this was very important. Think of the way the writer to the Hebrews opens his book by comparing Jesus to whom?

Well, greater than even an angel. because the angel would have been not only a given, but of such a rank of importance.

And Jesus is even greater than that. An angel was the way that God continually would give his message to the people of old. Look, his identity is even listed there in verse 19.

[19 : 51] I am Gabriel. Now, for a congregation who's recently been in Daniel, think of that. For Gabriel appeared in the book of Daniel and said, shut the revelation up, seal the book until the end of time when God's kingdom will come.

The fact that there's not only an angel here, but it's Gabriel the angel is an indication that we have come to one of the most momentous, important moments in history.

That God is preparing to speak. And the seals are being opened. And the end is arriving. And the kingdom is coming. For Gabriel is here.

What a great, powerful movement to the credibility of the gospel. The identity of the angel is given to us. The import of the angel for credibility is certainly there among us.

And the interpretation by the angel, well, it ought to bring fear and knowledge to us. Notice he's fearful.

[21 : 03] Our own Angela Kinney is doing PhD work. She's in Vienna today. She works in this realm of angels. I guess it's no coincidence given her first name of Angela.

But at any rate, she, in her research, has helped me understand that when you see angels in literature, they are fearsome, terrifying, awesome creatures.

You know, we tend to think of them as pristine and simple and inviting. You know, wings like this. In literature, oftentimes, they have multiple eyes and multiple tongues.

And every time you see someone in the scriptures reacting to the appearance of an angel, guess what? They don't go, wow, this is cool, can I hang you around my neck? No.

Those who see an angel in the scriptures fall in fear. A being that has been created as a messenger, of the living God, is now in my presence.

[22 : 17] So for Luke, and for Theophilus, the reader, and for you, all elements to bring credibility to the message.

And look, it's an interpretation of what will come. Those verses, 15 to 17, are the core of our text. That the one that was going to be born, John, was a forerunner and fulfillment to the things promised at the very last verse in the Christian canon, Malachi, that we should expect one to come in the power of Elijah, who would turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just.

That the interpretation given by the angel is, the time has come for the kingdom of God to arrive in our midst and I announce it to you, Zachariah, priest, serving in the temple, that all the world would know.

How do you prepare for Christmas this year if you're a young father? it's going to be a lot more than getting a tree and making sure it can stand up in the stand.

It's going to be a lot more than buying gifts. The proper preparation of the father for the advent of preparing himself for the coming of the kingdom is to return his heart back to his children.

[24 : 01] For when that happens something's going on. And I ask you fathers among us what are you doing to prepare your family for advent arrival coming of the king first act.

Repent that there would be a reorientation of your heart that your own children would be the center the reason perhaps for which you are kept alive by God.

That's what the Baptist began to do and that's what we should do. This little phrase is fascinating to me.

I'm just going to give you a hint that I think it's something we're going to have to wrestle with later in the book. Notice how the ministry of John is connected to these words wisdom of the just that the disobedient now return to the wisdom of the just.

In Luke's gospel you're going to see two groups of people those who justify themselves before God and those who allow God to justify them before him.

[25 : 35] The self justifiers and the God justifiers and what the fathers were to do was to begin instructing their families again that God is the one who makes you just right admissible into the kingdom through his grace and mercy and forgiveness found in his son.

That you are not the one who makes yourself just get that piece of wisdom straight says Luke. I mean just peer ahead just for a brief peek into Luke 7 something we'll see later in the year as we read it.

The ministry of the baptists arrives again in verse 28 of chapter 7 and you'll see a distinction between the people who are waiting for God to justify them and the Pharisees and the lawyers who reject that notion.

Verse 30 the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purposes of God for themselves that is in the ministry of the baptists not having been baptized by him. To what then shall I compare the people of this generation says Jesus?

What are they like? They're like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another we played the flute for you and you did not dance we sang a dirge and you did not weep for John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine and you say he has a demon the son of man has come eating and drinking and you say look at him a glutton and a drunkard a friend of tax gatherers and sinners here's the line yet wisdom is justified by all her children.

[27 : 16] The connection then again between the ministry of the Baptist and the wisdom that is necessary that you might be justified. Get that straight this Christmas. the ministry of the Baptist is to prepare the way of the Lord that you would be made just and the wise they'll heed it.

May we heed it. It's historically reliable. It comes to the older woman not the younger which only builds on its plausibility.

it's announced in the temple to a priest which is an expectation with the truth. It comes through the ministry of an angel which indicates that God is again at work and it connects it to the ministry of the Baptist that unites both testaments together.

So says Luke even before we arrive at Christmas. The child then is John.

Isn't that the most fascinating feature of the whole Luke and Christmas beginning? I mean you do almost expect if you're not familiar with the story at all that when you get to verse 13 in the text and you have no understanding of Christmas at all you're waiting for the last word to be Jesus.

[28 : 45] Do not be afraid your prayers have been answered your wife will bear you a son and you shall call his name Emmanuel. No John. The credibility of Christmas is not that there was a birth one birth the son's birth it's only credible if there are two births John's birth the forerunner's birth for that is what was promised.

Think about that lately come Christmas what do you celebrate at Christmas oh having been to Holy Trinity now on the second Sunday of Advent I'm celebrating two births one one that would prepare my heart through the ministry of John one that would make me ready to receive the king himself imagine if all you had was the arrival of the king come Christmas well that would be a day of judgment so severe that there would be no hope three responses so far in the text to the credibility and here we get to ourselves look at Zachariah's response he said to the angel verse 18 how shall

I know this I'm an old man my wife's advanced in years in other words he's saying impossible can't happen not gonna go and the angel answered to him and said I love this I am Gabriel how is this gonna happen hey I'm Gabriel wake up smell the coffee God has sent me I am the one that announces how God works in the end and I stand in the presence of God and I was sent to speak to you and behold you will not be able to speak because you disbelieve my words that's the first response to the Christmas message that the religious one to whom we should expect him to be ready to receive it disbelieves it and the one who disbelieves it has nothing to say concerning it I would say to us this morning you don't want to be that one in the text you don't want to be the one who disbelieves and therefore ends up mute for the greatest holiday season event interpretation in all of history now will come upon you and you will have no words to bear testimony to what

God has done you will indeed be in the world on this earth by yourself with your own thoughts as God marches on second response the response of the people that's a much better response for you this morning than to say Christmas is not admissible it's not credible I disbelieve it much better for you to say on the basis of what I've read in Luke so far something's going on

I better come back next week and find out and we invite you to do that the best response of all wow I love the words of Elizabeth at the end after these days 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 a woman who received the word of God concerning the good news that the kingdom was at hand indeed within her I call you to that belief today to a belief that would hold that God takes away your reproach and that you would receive the word of the kingdom through the credibility of Luke's message on Christmas isn't it good to know that we can determine what is credible and admissible without having to get behind that couch come Christmas

[33 : 55] Eve our heavenly father this text and the the continual arrival of an angelic host to to put fear in us and yet one that would move us to repentance and faith may we sing of that this season even this morning to the glory of your name amen