

Ordinary People, Extraordinary God

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church. The Christmas season has begun. It's actually snowing outside. Did you realize that? Feels like the first Sunday in Advent when it's snowing outside.

So yes, this is the first Sunday in the church calendar of the time of the year we call Advent. Advent means arrival. And that means we're starting a new sermon series.

This is a time when we remember the arrival, the coming of Jesus, the Son of God in the flesh. And when we look ahead to a second coming, his arrival in glory. So here we are in the Christmas season once again.

But of course, this time of year is filled with all sorts of cares and concerns, isn't it? During the holidays, it seems like our relationships, our finances, our work, they can kind of all come to a head and we can feel the pull and the pressure.

And on top of that, as another year winds down and we start to get reflective, maybe we start to wonder, man, is this worth it? Does any of this even matter? Another year has gone by and what's different?

[1 : 1 0] And at the popular level, Christmas kind of comes as this season that can almost sort of paper over these real concerns and cares with a kind of shallow festivity.

You know, another work party, another gift exchange, another terrible remake of the same old holiday songs. You know what I'm talking about, right? Do they know it's Christmas time at all? But, you know, when we turn to the Bible, we find that the message of Christ's coming, his advent, is nothing of that kind of sort. You know, rather than papering over our real human cares and concerns, the message of advent meets us right in the midst of them.

You know, this is no sort of shallow festivity, but a message of real hope and a message of real grace. And one of the places where we see the message of Christ's coming, meeting our very real human lives, our very real human concerns, is in the opening chapters of the Gospel of Luke. Luke chapters 1 and 2 contain some very familiar Christmas stories. Yes, and yet in Luke's Gospel, we see how the good news of Jesus' arrival intersects with our very real human lives.

[2 : 2 7] So this holiday season, this advent, we're going to be walking through Luke chapters 1 and 2. And hopefully we'll get a fresh glimpse of how Christmas is good news for our real lives.

So let me invite you to turn with me to Luke chapter 1. That's page 803 in the Pew Bible, if you'd like to turn there. We're going to look at verses 5 through 25 today.

Luke 1, 5 through 25. I will go ahead and read verses 1 through 4 for us. Those may not be on the screen, but you can follow them in the Bible. I'll read verses 1 through 4, but our focus will be on verses 5 through 25.

So let me pray for us, and then I'll read. Let's pray. Father, as we've just sung, come to our hearts, Lord Jesus.

Lord, we pause before you as we are about to read your word and open up our hands and acknowledge we have many cares and concerns. And we come to another holiday season, God, perhaps already tired, already weary.

[3 : 3 3] Or perhaps we come expectant and hopeful and joyful because this time of year is here again. God, we come with all sorts of mixed emotions. But we pray now that as we come to your word, you would speak powerfully to us.

Lord, give us the right expectation that you are a speaking, living, and loving God. And we come asking for your help as we look at this passage, that you would speak again fresh to us this good news about Jesus.

That you would make room in our hearts for you, for your spirit, and for your kingdom in our midst. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. All right. Luke chapter 1.

Verse 1. Luke writes this. And as much as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, 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, that you may have certainty concerning the things you've been taught. 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.

[4 : 47] 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, 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.

[5 : 46] 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.

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.

[7 : 00] And for five months, she kept herself hidden, saying, Thus the Lord has done for me. And the days when he looked on me to take away my reproach among the people.

So if you're starting a good story, if you're starting a good story, where do you begin? Maybe you introduce the narrator. Call me Ishmael, right?

Or maybe you place it somewhere in history. It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. Or perhaps maybe you begin it with a bit of good English irony. It's a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

But if you're starting a good story, where do you start? And what if you're starting not just a good story, but an important story? A true story. Perhaps what you think is the most important story that any human could ever hear.

How do you start that story? Well, that's what Luke is up to here in the passage we just read. He's trying to tell us how it all began.

[8 : 09] How the things that had been accomplished in his day. World shaping, life changing, history altering things. He's trying to tell us how all those things began.

Where does it begin? This story that we've come to call the gospel. This story, this good news about Jesus, the Messiah. Well, for Luke, it all begins with an ordinary couple, an extraordinary promise, and a trustworthy God.

And maybe if we can see how it all began back then, we'll see how it can take root and begin again and again and again right now too. So let's take a look.

Let's take a look together at how Luke starts his story. It all begins with an ordinary couple. We see this in verses 5 through 7 where Luke introduces us to Zachariah and Elizabeth.

Zachariah was a priest. A priest who, as we learn later in Luke's gospel, lived in the hill country outside of Jerusalem. Now, the priests in those days were organized into 24 different divisions, and

each division would serve up at Jerusalem in the temple for two weeks a year, in addition to the big feasts of Passover and tabernacles.

[9 : 22] And Zachariah, we're told, was in the division of Abijah. But, you know, most of the year, he was a simple priest living in the hill country with his wife Elizabeth. Now, Luke has good things to say about Zachariah and Elizabeth, doesn't he?

You know, first, it's not just Zachariah who's in the priestly family line, but Elizabeth too. She's a daughter of Aaron. That is a descendant of the priestly family of Aaron. So when it comes to their family, Luke has good things to say.

But he also has good things to say about their devotion, right? They were righteous before the Lord, Luke says, blameless. Now, this doesn't mean that they were without sin.

No, it meant that they trusted in the provision of forgiveness available under the law of Moses, and they walked in the commandments as best they could. In other words, they were genuine believers. They loved and trusted the God of Israel. So Luke has good things to say about Zachariah and Elizabeth. But, you know, on the whole, they were an ordinary ministry couple.

[10 : 23] Two godly saints, growing old, faithfully serving the Lord. You know, you can imagine a small country church served by an old faithful pastor and his wife.

And that's Zachariah and Elizabeth. An ordinary couple, right? Except, perhaps, for one important detail. Luke says, they were childless.

After years of faithfully following the Lord together, doing good ministry, loving God, and loving their neighbors, Zachariah and Elizabeth, all that time, were unable to have a child.

And now, Luke says, they were simply too old to have any hope of getting pregnant. Now, you can imagine how painful that must have been for them, to reach old age and to have lost hope of having a child of their own.

Add to that the fact that it was a shameful thing in the first century to be unable to have children. Some people, wrongly, some people thought that it was, that childlessness could even be caused by sin in your life.

[11 : 30] That it was sort of your fault that you didn't have children. So, in addition to the just natural grief, Zachariah and Elizabeth bore this kind of social reproach as well.

And, of course, Luke is very clear. They were blameless before God. And yet, they were still barren. You see, although they were faithful followers of God, they still experienced trial and hardship. Now, there's a lesson here for us, isn't there? In this fallen world, we are not guaranteed a trouble-free life. Even faithful saints will suffer.

And in many ways, that is the ordinary Christian life. We shouldn't expect that life will be easy if we follow God. Oftentimes, the reality is just the opposite.

So, Luke's story begins with an ordinary couple. An ordinary couple experiencing the hardships of ordinary life in a fallen world. Friends, is that you today?

[12 : 39] Perhaps like Zachariah and Elizabeth, you're feeling the approach of old age. And wondering if perhaps God has done all that he's planning to do in your life. Perhaps like Zachariah and Elizabeth, you're feeling the weight of trial and hardship.

Of disappointment and sorrow in the midst of a life of faithfulness. But you see, this is how it begins. This is how it all begins.

With ordinary people like you and me. You know, Zachariah and Elizabeth aren't the only people in the Bible to struggle with infertility. Do you remember Hannah in 1 Samuel chapter 1?

Or Manoah and his wife in Judges 13? Or Rachel in Genesis 30? Or Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 15? God has a way, doesn't he?

Of using ordinary people in the midst of hardship and suffering to advance his redemptive work. Luke's story, God's story, begins with ordinary people.

[13 : 45] But then, something happens. It all begins when ordinary people receive an extraordinary promise. We see this in verses 8 through 17.

It's one of those few weeks of the year when Zachariah is in Jerusalem. And by God's providence, the lot falls to Zachariah. To be the one, during the time of the afternoon prayer, to go into the temple and arrange the incense on the altar of incense.

Which was symbolic for the prayers of the people. Now this was no ordinary thing. In fact, there's some evidence to suggest that this would have been a once-in-a-lifetime thing for Zachariah.

You see, because there were so many priests, you could only do this particular duty one time. And then you would have to defer to others and let them have their turn. So here's Zachariah. The people are gathering in the courts around the temple, readying themselves for prayer. And he gets to enter the temple himself. To go into that first room where there's the lampstand. And the table with the bread. And the altar of incense.

[14:51] All set up in front of the great curtain. That separates this first room from the inner room. The Holy of Holies. Where only the high priest could go once a year. Here was Zachariah experiencing the pinnacle of his priestly duty.

Offering prayers on behalf of his people. And then, something completely unexpected happens. An angel shows up.

And Zachariah is not just surprised. He's terrified. I mean, can you imagine? You know, you come to a prayer meeting late one night at church. Oh, you're the only one there.

And suddenly, you know, it's not Pastor Nick opening up the doors. But an angel of the Lord. You would rightly be freaking out. But the angel says, don't be afraid, Zachariah.

Your prayer has been heard. And then comes the extraordinary promise. The promise that the long years of anguish he and Elizabeth had experienced were not for naught.

[16:00] The promise that God, at the right time, was going to answer their prayers for a child. But this child wasn't going to be just any child.

This child wouldn't just bring joy and gladness to Zachariah and Elizabeth. No. This child would bring rejoicing. This child would bring rejoicing to many in Israel. Why?

Because this child would be great before the Lord. And the angel goes on to describe how this child would be set apart from birth. He wouldn't even drink wine or strong drink.

He would be set apart from birth. And in the power of the Holy Spirit, he would fulfill the role of a prophet. But not just any prophet. He would come and serve in the spirit and power of Elijah.

Now to understand the significance of what the angel is saying to Zachariah, you have to understand a little something about biblical history. You have to understand that there hadn't been a prophet in Israel since the time of Malachi.

[17:05] And that was 400 years before the time of Zachariah. For 400 years, God had been silent. Now, of course, the people had the written scriptures.

And they studied it. And they poured over it. And they wrote commentaries on it. But what the written word promised was that God would send another prophet. That God would bring his word afresh.

In fact, that's exactly how the book of Malachi, that last prophet, ends. God says in chapter 4, verse 5, 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 the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers. So Malachi ends with a promise that one like Elijah will come.

Elijah, you'll remember, was the great prophet of Israel during the period of the kings. In many ways, Elijah was the prototypical prophet. And Malachi sees a day when another like Elijah would come.

[18:06] And he would renew the people of God. And get the people of God ready for the day when the Lord himself would come. And of course, Zachariah, he knew that prophecy.

Everyone did. When he entered the temple to offer incense, that's probably part of the prayer that he prayed. God, rescue Israel.

Send your word like you promised. Raise us up again. Restore our dry bones. You see, it wasn't just Zachariah and Elizabeth who were struggling in the first century.

The Jewish people as a whole were struggling. Luke reminds us in verse 5 that all this happened in the days of King Herod. That is Herod the Great, who ruled as king in Judea from 37 to 4 BC.

And even though Herod was called a king, and even though he extravagantly renovated many Jewish cities, not least Jerusalem and the temple complex itself, even so, Herod was a parody at best and a blasphemy at worst.

[19:18] He was not what God's king or God's kingdom was supposed to look like. Herod compromised with the Romans, participated in the oppression of the people, and was as ruthless as any pagan ruler.

But Zachariah, hands shaking as he offers incense on the altar, prayers lifted up in the midst of his own suffering, in the midst of the suffering of his people, is met with this extraordinary promise.

At long last, God is breaking the silence. Not just to Zachariah and Elizabeth, but to all Israel as well.

After 400 years, again, the Lord is speaking. A prophet will come. Zachariah and Elizabeth will have a son, and he will turn the hearts of the people back to the Lord.

He will get the people prepared for the Lord's coming. And Zachariah and Elizabeth will call his name John.

[20 : 24] Not John the Apostle. He'll come later in the story. This is the John we know as John the Baptist. The forerunner. The one who will herald the coming king and get the people ready for his arrival.

And now we start to see why Luke begins his account of Jesus' life with this episode. You know, all four gospel writers begin with some sort of reference to John the Baptist.

Right? So it's not surprising that Luke does that as well. Because the story of Jesus the Messiah begins with the story of John, the forerunner. But Luke is showing us here that the story of John, well, that begins with the story of his parents.

Zachariah and Elizabeth. And that's quite a story, isn't it? What you wouldn't know from just reading Mark's or Matthew's or John's gospel is that John the Baptist's birth was miraculous in its own way too.

But by connecting the story of John to the story of his parents, Zachariah and Elizabeth, Luke is also connecting this story to the story of the whole people of Israel. After all, Zachariah and Elizabeth are faithful Israelites from the house of Aaron serving in the temple.

[21 : 43] And they have their hardships. And they have their doubts. Just like so many in Israel as well. Zachariah bearing reproach. Aging Zachariah voicing his secret doubts in the privacy of the temple.

How many in Israel also felt the same reproach? How many felt the same doubts? But you know, if all of this connects to the big story of Israel, then it also connects to the big story of the whole world. Because the God who made his covenant with Israel is the same God who created you and me and everything in the world.

What is God going to do with his people? What is God going to do with his world? And the answer is, he's going to keep his promises.

And this is step one. He's sending a prophet to make ready for himself a people prepared. And he sends this prophet through an aging couple long past the years of childbirth to show that all of it is going to be done through his grace.

[22 : 56] The name John, Yohanan, after all, means the Lord has shown favor. But John's just a forerunner.

This whole story points ahead. What we will see in the coming weeks is that Luke has written his whole birth narrative in chapters 1 and 2 to display the ultimate greatness, not of John, but of Jesus. In every way, Jesus is superior to John. John is born out of barrenness. Jesus is born of a virgin. John is great as a prophet before the Lord.

Jesus is great as the promised ruler from the line of David. John paves the way. Jesus is the way. This is the real extraordinary promise.

The promise that comes to each one of us. Not merely that a prophet is on the way, but that the king has come. And that through believing in him, our deepest shame, our deepest fears, our deepest doubts can be answered and taken away.

[24 : 11] This is how it begins. This is how it begins for us. Ordinary people who receive an extraordinary promise. And the passage ends by showing us that this extraordinary promise is made by a trustworthy God.

He is the one in whom we can place our trust. We can take him at his word. Of course, this point is made in both a positive and a negative way as the passage comes to an end.

On the negative side, in verses 18 through 22, we have Zachariah's doubts. Having heard the angel's message, he asked, but how can this be? We're too old.

He wants some kind of sign, some kind of proof. And at first, the angel's answer is basically, how can you ask for proof? I've come directly from God with this message.

If God has said it, then how can you doubt it? But then, partly as a sign, partly as a discipline for Zachariah and his unbelief, Zachariah's made unable to speak for the next nine months.

[25 : 23] Imagine having received the best news of your life and not being able to speak about it. Imagine Zachariah coming out of the temple. Everyone's been waiting.

What's he doing in there? And he can't say a word. But in verse 22, we learn that Zachariah's silence becomes just as powerful a testimony to the fact that God is on the move.

And for nine months, this good news will well up inside of him. It'll stew in his bones for nine long months until finally, it comes pouring forth in praise and poetry at the end of chapter one, when John is born at last.

And you'll have to come back in a couple weeks to see exactly what he says. But on the positive side, we have Elizabeth in verses 24 through 25.

The passage ends with God keeping his promise. Elizabeth conceives a child and in response, she gives praise to God. You know, it's unclear why she keeps herself hidden for the first five months of her pregnancy.

[26 : 37] Perhaps it's simply to enjoy uninterrupted praise and communion with God. After all, God has granted her request for a child after a lifetime of prayers.

That's something that might make you want to pull away and just enjoy God's favor for a little bit. But whatever the reason, it's a fascinating contrast to Zachariah, isn't it?

Zachariah is forced into temporary silence as a discipline for his unbelief. Elizabeth chooses quiet and seclusion to worship God. But either way, God's showing himself to be trustworthy.

The passage ends both through Zachariah's animated silence and Elizabeth's worshipful seclusion. It ends demonstrating the fact that we can take God at his word.

Elizabeth is with child. The prophet like Elijah, the forerunner, will come and God's rescue plan will unfold. And indeed, it has unfolded.

[27 : 46] Christ has come. He has lived. He has died. He has risen and he will come again. And he promises the forgiveness of sins and new life to all who turn from sin and trust in him.

And he promises increased holiness and joy as we keep in step with his spirit. And he promises, just like Zachariah and Elizabeth, to use even our suffering for his glory and our good.

And he promises that one day all suffering and evil will come to an end and that we will rise with him when he returns. How about us, friends? Are we willing to take God at his word?

That's how it all begins. Ordinary people who place their faith in the extraordinary promises of the supremely trustworthy God.

May that be us. Let's pray. Lord, we ask as we embark upon another Advent season that you would grant us the gift of faith once again in your extremely great and precious promises.

[29 : 03] Lord, thank you that all your promises are yes and amen in our Lord Jesus. That all that we've longed for and all that you've spoken is found in him. Lord, draw our hearts and our minds and our affections up to him again, we pray, that our lives might be shaped more and more into his image.

We pray this, Father, in Jesus' name. Amen.