



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

### You shall call his name John

#### Luke 1:5-25

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We began our study of St. Luke's Gospel last Sunday by looking at his prologue. We saw there that Luke was not an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, but for the sake of his friend, Theophilus, he consulted the eyewitnesses and the accounts they had written so that he could write his own orderly account. Theophilus apparently had his doubts about the Christian faith and Luke wrote to assure him of its truth. Writing in the 60s, about thirty to thirty-five years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the young Church was facing dramatic persecution by the Jews. In a few years they would begin facing persecution by the Romans. Luke stresses to Theophilus that despite what may be happening, God does indeed have a plan, that he's been directing and controlling it from the very beginning, and that there's no reason to think that he's now abandoned it. And remember that Theophilus means "beloved or God" or "lover of God". In writing to him, St. Luke writes to us all. And as Luke the Evangelist gives us reason to be certain of the truth of the Gospel message, he now calls us to discharge the work of evangelists as we proclaim that same message to our own generation.

Luke begins the story in verse 5 of the first chapter. Unlike Mark and Matthew, Luke doesn't begin with Jesus; Luke begins with John the Baptist. More specifically, he begins with John's parents and the announcement of John's birth. And if you look at verse 5 he sets the scene with these words:

**In the days of Herod, king of**

### Judea...

This was the normal way for ancient historians to begin. Their calendars were usually marked off not with dates like 2013, but by the reigns of their kings. Herod—we know him as "Herod the Great"—reigned from 37 B.C. to A.D. 4. As we'll see, this story begins not long before the end of Herod's reign. Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt to protect Jesus from Herod and then returned a short while later, after he had died. But there's more to what Luke is doing here than simply giving us a timeframe. To say that this took place during Herod's reign would have conjured up all sorts of ideas and emotions about those times. Think of all the things that come to mind when we talk about the "Reign of Queen Victoria". For some the adjective "Victorian" conjures up images of styles in architecture and fashion. For other people it brings to mind a sense of propriety or prudishness. To talk about the reign of Queen Victoria takes us back to the British Empire at its height. The history of our own island is tied up in the Victorian Era. Our capital was named after her as is the big hotel on the harbour-front. Our Victorian-style legislative buildings sit behind a large statue of her. Yes, we've whitewashed a lot of the history, but to talk about the reign of Queen Victoria is, for most people, to conjure up a set of mostly positive images.

For Jews in the First Century, to talk of the reign of Herod the Great was to conjure up all sorts of images too, but these were overwhelmingly *negative* images. Herod held the title "King of the Jews", but he wasn't Jewish; he was Idumean: a foreigner descended from Ishmael. And he only held his position because the Romans had made him king. He was their client, their puppet. Those things alone would have been enough to make Herod unpopular with the Jews, but it gets worse. Herod pretended at being a Jew, but he was notoriously bad at keeping the law. He styled himself King of the Jews and was paranoid

that everyone was conspiring to take that title away. He murdered his own sons because he was afraid they might conspire against him. Matthew tells us that when the wise men said they were going to Bethlehem to worship the king of the Jews who had just been born there, Herod had all the baby boys in that town murdered. Anyone Herod thought was even remotely a threat was bumped off pretty quickly. This didn't make him any friends. So in an attempt to make people like him, he embarked on all sorts of public building projects. If you were to visit Jerusalem today, much of what you'd see in the Old City and around the Temple Mount was built by Herod. He even rebuilt the temple itself, bigger and better than it ever had been. But none of it convinced the people to like Herod. He taxed them heavily to pay for all of his projects. He never let anyone forget that he was the one who had done the building. Every stone had his personal seal engraved on it. Herod may have rebuilt the temple, but he also built his own fortress next door, right on the temple mount. That didn't go over very well with the Jews. And Herod bought the high priests, the men in charge of the temple, for himself. And so the Jews would go to worship at the temple as they were called to do by the Scriptures, but the temple itself was only a reminder of their subjugation under a corrupt king controlled by foreigners and they brought their sacrifices to corrupt priests owned by their corrupt king.<sup>1</sup>

The Jews had returned from their exile in Babylon and were once again living in the land God had promised and worshiping at his temple, but for all intents and purposes they were still in exile. It wasn't really their land; it belonged to the Romans now. They weren't ruled by a king in David's line, but by a foreign king descended from Ishmael. And they went to the temple, but God's presence was no

<sup>1</sup> For a vivid and more detailed look at Herod's reign see: Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Time of Jesus the Messiah*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Longmans, 1896), vol. 1, pp. 111-132.

longer there. And so this time when Herod reigned was a time when the Jews were living in hopeful expectation for the Messiah as they never had before. Things were bad—in fact, most people couldn't imagine how they could get any worse—and so they expected that God would fulfil his promises of redemption soon. This is the world that Luke draws us into: into the world of Herod, who claimed to be King of the Jews, preparing to introduce us to Jesus, the *real* King of the Jews.

**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. 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.** (Genesis 1:5-7)

Into the middle of all of this steps an elderly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. As we'll see later, they were peasants from the Judean hill country. Zechariah was a priest—he was of the tribe of Levi—and Elizabeth too was a daughter more specifically of Aaron's direct line. Normally this would have given them a prestigious position in Israel. We're also told that they were "righteous before God". That doesn't mean they were perfect, but it does mean that they were committed to keeping God's law as a sign of their gratefulness for all of his blessings. And yet, we're told, they were elderly, Elizabeth was barren, and they had no son. They had no one to carry on their prestigious lines; they had no one to take care of them in their old age, and despite their faithfulness to God, the people around them would have always been wondering what their secrets sins were. Barrenness was seen as a sign of God's judgement. They were righteous before God, but bore the scorn of the men and women around

them. And Luke places this elderly, childless couple here at the beginning of his Gospel. They tell us that God is about to do something big. For four hundred years God had been silent. He had last spoken to his people through Malachi, but there had been no prophets since. There had been no great miracles like those we see in the Old Testament. But now we're introduced to Zechariah and Elizabeth as we were introduced to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis or to Elkanah and Hannah, the father and mother of Samuel: a barren couple, an angel, an announcement—God is still here, God is still in control, God is still working out his plan, God is finally going to act in history!

**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.** (Luke 1:8-10)

There were about 20,000 priests in those days and they were divided into twenty-four "divisions". Each division was called up twice a year to go to Jerusalem and serve in the temple for a week. That was a big deal for a simple, country priest. But the really big deal was to be chosen to burn incense. Incense was offered twice each day, in the morning and in the afternoon. The chosen priest would enter the temple and the holy place itself—the place just outside the holy of holies—and he would sprinkle incense on the golden altar and pray for the salvation of Israel. As he offered his prayer and his incense inside the temple, the people would be gathered outside, kneeling on the ground and with their arms upraised, praying for the same thing. The offering of incense symbolized their prayers for deliverance rising up to God. This was the high point of any priest's lifetime of service, but because there were so many priests,

the duty was assigned by lot and a priest was only allowed the privilege once in his life.<sup>2</sup>

For years—maybe thirty, forty, or even fifty—Zechariah had been waiting to be chosen by the dice, but it didn't happen until this day. This was literally a once in a lifetime experience and we can imagine Zechariah as he entered the temple, full of reverence and gratitude. And as he prepared to pray and sprinkle incense on the altar, the people outside were praying with him.

**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."** (Luke 1:11-13)

As John was praying and sprinkling incense on the altar an angel appeared. Luke says he appeared at the right side of the altar—the side next to the holy of holies. Maybe he came from that place where God's presence was said to reside. And Zechariah was naturally afraid. Everyone in the Bible is afraid when they meet an angel, but as every angel says, this one also says to Zechariah: "Do not be afraid!" Zechariah's prayers have been answered. But which prayers? Zechariah and Elizabeth were old; she was long past her childbearing years. They'd probably stopped praying for a son many years before. Zechariah was in the temple that day praying for the deliverance of Israel. And yet the angel, Gabriel, draws both prayers together as he tells Zechariah that his wife is going to bear him a son named

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<sup>2</sup> For details on the temple service and ordering of the priests, see Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Service* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), *in loc.*, also *The Life and Time of Jesus the Messiah*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Longmans, 1896), vol. 1, pp. 133-143.

John. “John” means “The Lord has been gracious”.

**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.”** (Luke 1:14-17)

The angel says that John will bring gladness and joy and that the people will rejoice at his birth. Again, what were the people outside praying for? They were an oppressed people living in exile in their own land and waiting for God’s deliverance. John’s birth signals the beginning of God’s work to deliver them. And the angel says that he’ll be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before he’s born. In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit filled men and women *temporarily* to equip them for specific tasks, and then left them. John’s indwelling by the Spirit and his coming to restore the ministry of Elijah points to his work as a prophet. He’s going to restore the prophetic ministry that had been gone for four hundred years; he’s going to call the people to repentance as Elijah did. But he’s also going to usher in a new age. John is a bridge between the Old Testament prophets, who were indwelt by the Spirit temporarily, and the people of the New Covenant, whom the Spirit will indwell *permanently*, equipping them to be effective ministers of the kingdom. And then the angel recalls the promise God made through Malachi, the last of the prophets: John will “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.”

As the son of a priest, John would inherit his father’s priestly role, but John will fulfil that as he also draws together the ministry of the Old Testament prophets and gives them a unified voice declaring Jesus the Messiah. He will call the people to repentance; he will call the fathers who have neglected and abused their children back into right relationship with them; he will call the disobedient back to the ways of the just—and the Holy Spirit will make that calling *effectual* for many, not for all, but for many. Through the empowering of the Holy Spirit, John will gather a people ready for the Lord’s coming.

This was truly an answer to prayer. It was an answer to the prayers of Zechariah and Elizabeth for a son, but more importantly, their personal desire for a son was being drawn up into the greater prayers of the nation for deliverance. Gabriel’s announcement is a proclamation that the “end times” and the “last days” had come. God was finally ready to deliver his people, and John was going to prepare the way. And the people needed John’s ministry. They were all living in anticipation of these last days when God would act in history, but few if any were expecting what God would really do through Jesus. The Zealots were calling for a revolution. They wanted to rise up and violently overthrow Herod and the Romans. They wanted to follow in the footsteps of the Maccabees and put a son of David on the throne again. The Pharisees were seeking to usher in the kingdom with better law keeping. They thought that God was absent from his people because of their sin and their compromise. Others just didn’t seem to care; they made friends with Herod and the Romans, profited from those relationships, and did whatever they could not to make waves. John’s ministry was to call the people away from their false conceptions of what the kingdom would be and who the Messiah was so that when Jesus came,

they would be ready to follow him.<sup>3</sup>

This was good news, but Zechariah had his doubts. This all sounded too good to be true.

**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.”** (Luke 1:18-20)

It’s hard to fault Zechariah considering the circumstances. God had given signs in the past without rebuking the men who asked for them. And yet that’s just the point. Here’s Gabriel, one who spends his days in the presence of God, bring this message to Zechariah, a priest who has spent his life learning the Scriptures and who should know that when God makes a promise, he *always* keeps it. Zechariah should know better; he shouldn’t need a sign. And so the angel rebukes Zechariah by making him mute and, depending on how we understand the text, maybe even deaf as well, until John is born. Notice that God is merciful here. He doesn’t strike down Zechariah for his unbelief; he rebukes him in such a way that he gives Zechariah reason to have the faith he lacks. He doesn’t *punish* Zechariah so much as he *prepares* him. God’s rebuke is meant to build faith where faith is lacking.

God’s rebuke poses a problem for Zechariah. After the priest offered incense on the altar, he was supposed

<sup>3</sup> On the Jewish “parties” or “sects”, see N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 167-214 and J. Julius Scott, Jr. *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1995), pp. 202-217.

to go out to the steps at the front of the temple and proclaim a blessing over the people gathered there to pray. On this particular day, the people had been waiting longer than usual and, no doubt, wondering what was going on in the temple—maybe wondering if something had gone wrong.

**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.** (Luke 1:21-23)

All of this assures that God is going to do what he's said he will do. If God could silence John, he can certainly provide the son he had promised. And here are more of Luke's eyewitnesses, gathered in the court and watching as John walks onto the steps, but is unable to give the blessing they were waiting for. As he tried to sign to them the natural assumption would have been that he'd had a vision while he was in the temple. They might not know what it was all about on this day, but when John is born, they would all remember back to this day and know that God was up to something.

Luke goes on in verses 24 and 25, now telling us about Elizabeth.

**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."**

Luke doesn't tell us why Elizabeth hid herself for five months. It may have been to pray and to praise and to meditate on what God was doing. If nothing else, it puts her in a place to meet up with Mary and for John and

Jesus to meet for the first time before either was even born. It's in that meeting that John points people for the first time to the one who has come as Messiah and in answer to their prayers for deliverance.

Everything Luke writes here tells us that God is at work and that he's about to do something big. Even the *way* Luke reports these events tells us that God is unfolding his plan. Luke prepares us for what's going to happen by pointing us back to God's actions in the Old Testament, reminding us of God's mighty and saving deeds for his people. No one who knew the Old Testament could read this account of the announcement of John's birth and not see in the childless Zechariah and Elizabeth an echo of Abraham and Sarah as they waited for the son that God had promised. And in Elizabeth we see an echo of Hannah, who was barren, but prayed to God for a son and had her prayers answered in the birth of Samuel. And it was Samuel whose ministry was to condemn and depose the corrupt King Saul and to anoint David as King of the Jews. His ministry foreshadows John's as John directs the people away from the false kingdoms and rulers of the world and points them to the one, true King, the Son of David, Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

But the story, too, reminds us of how God works and gives you and me reason to have hope. God answers prayer. We're reminded that he doesn't always give his "yes" or "no" right away. Zechariah and Elizabeth had prayed for years, probably decades, and had very likely given up praying long ago. The Jews had been praying for hundreds of years for their deliverance. But God never abandoned them. His ears weren't deaf to those prayers. The answer was simply waiting for his timing. Luke reminds us that we need to be patient when we pray and we need to be ready to accept that God's timing is not our

timing. But what we read here also tells us that even as God works to unfold his plans for humanity—big, huge, gigantic plans that encompass our entire race—he never loses sight of us as individuals. Here God sets in motion the events that will bring the long-awaited Messiah, promised all the way back in Genesis 3. Here God is preparing for the redemption of humanity and the ushering in of his eternal kingdom, but brothers and sisters, in all of that God *still* has room to answer the prayers of this peasant couple from the Judean hill country. Our God is a big god. He's the creator and sustainer of the cosmos. And yet to save us from our sins, he became incarnate as one of us. He took his nature upon himself. Even resurrected and ascended, Jesus remains one of us—fully God, but still also fully human. In Jesus the almighty God of the universe has united himself to our weak, frail, and needy nature and in Jesus he never fails to hear us when we cry to him. Even as the wheels of redemption turn; as God topples earthly kings and empires; as he destroys our great enemies, sin and death; as he establishes his eternal kingdom; our God hears each of us, our God knows each of us, and our God never ceases to care for each of us.

Let us pray: Almighty God, we thank you that you are not only our Creator, but that you are also our Sustainer. We praise you for your awesome and ineffable might and we praise you that in Jesus you took our flesh upon yourself and became one with us. Remind us that while you work for the redemption of our race and of your creation, you never cease to hear our prayers or see our needs as individuals. Give us the grace to live confidently in both the great plans of redemption you have for us as a people and the promises you have made to us to love and care for us as individuals. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

<sup>4</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 379-380.