

## **Good News that Stays New and Good!**

**Luke 1:1-2:40**

**“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. (Luke 2:10 NIV)**

What do you think of when you think of Good News? If you're a sports fans, it's when your team wins, especially when they are the underdog. For a family there is "good news" when a son or daughter announces, "I got my acceptance letter into college," or better yet, "I got a job!" or "We're having a baby!" Have any of you ever wished for the good news of a new start? Perhaps you've made a mess of your life and wondered if there was a restart button for humans. Can I do a clean install? Have you ever made a mess of your life and longed for a reset button?

At critical times in Israel's history, when their world grew oppressive and morally dark as a result of their idolatry, God intervened to subvert the existing order and granted his people a new beginning, a fresh start. These junctures in salvation history became milestones in Israel's sacred story that were relived and celebrated in yearly feasts. Yet, despite God faithfully raising up deliverers and granting Israel a fresh start repeatedly, it never lasted. There was always an ominous crack in the foundation of the new order, a fatal character flaw in the human instruments: patriarchs grew faithless, priests turned corrupt, judges traded the rights of the poor for bribes, and kings became as wicked as their Canaanite successors. Despite Israel's failings, God maintained his witness through his prophets, who faithfully functioned as the conscience of the nation.

Unfortunately, Israel quit listening to her conscience, and after centuries of getting a "busy signal" from his people, God hung up the phone and left the building. For four hundred years God's people were shut up in a tomb of silence. After a millennium of failure, seventy years of exile and oppressive servitude under foreign domination with no new prophet or king in sight, Israel had become a nation in desperate need of change.

But the merciful and faithful God did not forget his promises. Just as 1 Samuel opens with the story of God inaugurating a new beginning through a barren woman after 400 years of spiritual compromise, so Luke's gospel opens with not one or two, but three angelic visitations to introduce the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, following 400 years of eerie silence. Luke is not introducing a new story but continuing and

advancing the story of God's work of saving the world to its climatic fulfillment in the person of Jesus. Luke's beginning consists of 120 verses, which is the longest of all the gospel writers. The text is a tapestry of three angelic visitations, three journeys of obedience, three songs of prophecy and praise – all of which surround two supernatural births. Framing the introduction is a description of the godly character of two elderly couples. Both reside in Jerusalem and are advanced in years. Together they represent the best of Israel's religious life and are given the highest accolades of character and devotion that have been constant for a lifetime.

Luke's magnificent opening gives us a clue that this new beginning will set the stage for the grand climax to Israel's history and the salvation of the world. This will be history's last new beginning. It is good news that remains forever new and good. Once this foundation is laid, everything in God's kingdom will be built upon it. As Paul writes, "For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 3.11). Today I will focus on the three angelic visitations.

### **I. The Angelic Visitation to Zechariah (1:5-20)**

The first hint that revolution is in the air is the presence of the archangel Gabriel, who stands before God in his court and who, we know from the book of Daniel, is an angelic messenger sent from God to help the prophet interpret visions regarding the last days (Dan 8:16; 9:21). Now, after several centuries God sends him again from heaven to announce two miraculous births. The first visitation is to the priest Zechariah at the temple in Jerusalem, announcing the birth of John. The second is to a young virgin named Mary in Nazareth of Galilee, announcing the birth of Jesus. If two were not enough, there is a third visitation. An angel of the Lord is sent to shepherds, who are watching their flocks in the fields outside Bethlehem.

Having your world rocked by an angel is shocking enough, but each successive visitation takes the word "impossible" to new heights. In the first instance, we meet a priestly family, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were both "righteous before God...but were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old" (1:6). For this godly and faithful couple, life had not turned out the way they had hoped and their deepest and most intimate hopes were unfulfilled. Gabriel breaks into Zechariah's world in the place we would expect it, in the temple during his priestly service.

**But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.” (Luke 1:13-15a NIV)**

Gabriel announces that his “prayer has been heard” and that his wife Elizabeth will bear him a son. These are tender words from a loving God. Though God is all about fulfilling his promises for the nation and the world, “the needs, hopes and fears of ordinary people are not forgotten in this larger story, precisely because of who Israel’s God is, the God of lavish, self-giving love.”<sup>1</sup> Though incredible, this promise it is not without precedent in Israel’s history. But that is not all. But then Gabriel announces that this child “will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (v. 15), which is new and unprecedented. This explains why Jesus said of John, “among those born of women there is no one greater than John” (Luke 7:28). John will function as a new Elijah to turn the children of Israel back to the Lord their God. And, as Israel’s last prophet, he will anoint the nation’s final king.

Zechariah is slow to believe in God’s promise and rather than rejoicing in thanksgiving and song, he is struck dumb, symbolic of the nation’s spiritual insensitivity. Despite Zechariah’s hardness of heart, Elizabeth still received the ability to conceive and, by the grace of God, her status was restored among God’s people.

## **II. The Angelic Visitation to Mary (1:24-38)**

In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent Gabriel back to earth for a second birth announcement “to Mary, far away from the temple mount in Jerusalem, to Nazareth in Galilee – insignificant, despised, unclean.”<sup>2</sup> The angel greets Mary with, “Greetings (lit. “rejoice”), you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you!” (1:28). Joy is to fill her heart because she is the recipient of God’s undeserved grace.

The phrase, “I will be with you,” conveys more significance than a generic promise of God’s traveling presence. It is most often addressed to Israel’s leaders when they are called to a task of insurmountable odds, like the Exodus. This was God’s promise to Moses before he sent him off to Egypt to confront Pharaoh. So now he gives the same speech to Mary, a young girl no more than 12-14 years old. If she will respond in faith, the omnipotent God will be with her to protect, encourage, and strengthen her

until the task for which she has been called is completed. That is a cause for joy, but that is only the half of it.

To a bewildered Mary, Gabriel explains that she will be the mother of Israel's long expected king, God's very own Son ("the Son of the Most High"), who will be given "the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end" (1:32-33). Gabriel's words echo the language of other birth announcements, especially the one given for Sarah, (Gen 17:16) coupled with Daniel's description of the exaltation of "one like a son of man" (Dan 7:13-14). Taken together, one cannot help but be overwhelmed that this is the climactic moment of history, the restoration of Israel and the salvation of the world!

What these annunciations teach us is that, contrary to what we teach our children, fulfillment in life is not found by being perfect and hoping that someone somewhere will applaud you. Fulfillment comes from being called into a world much larger than your own, a world where God is ever at work in people's lives to shape history and bring heaven to earth. God has such a plan for every one of us.

With the complexity of expectations whirling in her head, Mary asks, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Unlike Zechariah, who cast doubt on God's ability, Mary's question seeks an explanation to understand the supernatural *way* that the process will unfold. Gabriel's answer reveals that, though Mary indeed will play a role as an obedient recipient of grace, the miracle will be all God's doing.

**The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail." (1:35-37)**

Tom Wright explains,

The Holy Spirit will come upon Mary, enabling her to do and be more than she could by herself. But at the same time "the power of the Most High" will overshadow her. This is something different: God himself, the creator, will surround her completely with his sovereign power...Mary is the example of what always happens when God is at work by grace through human beings. God's power from the outside, and the indwelling

spirit within, together result in things being done which would have been unthinkable any other way.<sup>3</sup>

Gabriel concludes by reminding Mary of God's omnipotent power, that "no word from God will ever fail." With that final word, Mary's faith leaps over the wall.

**And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word." (1:38 ESV)**

The personal and social cost of shame and sorrow in making such a commitment is difficult to comprehend, but Mary will acquiesce and her exceptional faith becomes a model for all Israel. The result is that Mary, who in that world was at the bottom of the social scale in terms of age, family heritage and gender, turns out to be the one favored and exalted by God. In this revolutionary kingdom, one's status is defined by one's obedience to God and the privilege of being used for his saving purposes.

The miracle that occurs in Mary's womb is what happens to all of us when we put our trust in Jesus. The Holy Spirit is poured out into our hearts and we become part of God's new creation (Eph 1:13-14; Rom 5:5; 2 Cor 5:17) with our future eternally secured until Christ is formed in us. As Paul writes, "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6). Therefore there never be a need to have another re-start in salvation history. This is good news that forever remains good and new.

### **III. Jesus' Birth in Bethlehem (2:1-7)**

#### **A. The Backdrop: Caesar's Decree (2:1-5)**

The historical backdrop to Jesus' birth is a decree issued by Caesar Augustus that a census should be taken of the entire empire to increase Rome's tax base and thus the wealth of his treasury. Augustus was a brutal man, but as a master politician and administrator, he created a system of government that maintained unity and peace of the Mediterranean world for centuries to come. These exploits conferred on him the title of divinity across the Roman world.

*Divine Augustus Caesar,  
son of a god, imperator of land and sea,  
the benefactor and savior of the whole world*

The emperor's decree is a shameful reminder to the Jews that Rome exercise her power at will, doing whatever she wants, whenever she wants; and that they, as a conquered people, have no real power or influence. Thus, Joseph and Mary are forced

to make the arduous seventy-mile trek to Joseph's hometown of Bethlehem when it is anything but convenient.

The good news we serve doesn't deny the dark realities of tyrannical forces that dominate the world. Instead it subverts them in surprising ways and uses them to advance its purposes. Through the lens of faith, we are privileged to see that, because Mary and Joseph comply with Caesar's decree, God is able to transport them from Nazareth to Bethlehem just in time to fulfill the prophecy spoken by Micah seven centuries earlier:

**But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
though you are small among the clans of Judah,  
out of you shall come for me  
one who will be ruler over Israel,  
whose origins are from of old,  
from ancient times. (Micah 5:2 NIV)**

It is here in Bethlehem, David's birthplace, not Rome, that Luke records "the fulfillment of days," a phrase intended to convey much more than the completion of Mary's pregnancy. As Paul writes, "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law" (Gal 4:4).

### **B. The Birth of Jesus (2:6-7)**

Despite centuries of anticipation, Luke describes the birth of the son with surprising brevity and simplicity, with no fanfare.

**While they were there, the time came (lit. "the fulfillment of days) for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. (2:6-7)**

The scene is a delicate blend of poverty enveloped in care. When the son is born, he is lovingly wrapped in long "bands of cloth," then gently laid in a feeding trough, which serves as his cradle. In order to explain why this "royal" son is placed in a manger, Luke tells us that it was because "there was no *guest room* (Grk. *kataluma*) available for them." The Greek term *kataluma* is not the commercial lodging place that has been depicted in our Christmas plays for two millennia. Rather it is better translated "guest room," like the one Jesus used to celebrate his final Passover feast (Luke 22:11).

Because Mary had relatives in Judea and Joseph was of the line of David, it is very unlikely that they needed housing outside their family or relatives.

Kenneth Bailey gives a more accurate picture of the nativity scene as being a typical Middle-Eastern home, which consisted of a single room where the family lived and took their meals.<sup>4</sup> The floor of the room was a raised terrace; at the end of the terrace were steps descending to ground level and a doorway where the animals were brought in at night. In this way the animals were protected from the cold and provided warmth for the home at night. At the edge of the terraced level were feeding troughs carved in the ground, or out of stone, where the animals could feed. The reason why Jesus was placed in the feeding trough was because the guest room (*kataluma*) was full.

Perhaps someday we'll have to rewrite the poor inn keeper out of the Christmas pageant as well as the stable. Lest that dash your long-held Christmas imagination, it still communicates the same theology. Jesus is depicted as being received by the poor and marginalized of his day, while the rich and powerful are blind to his beauty. The manger may also suggest that his body, which will one day be laid in a tomb, will become true "bread" that will feed Israel and the nations. Luke uses identical language at his death:

**2:7 wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger**  
**23:53 wrapped [Jesus' body] in a linen cloth and laid it in a tomb**

In both cases his body is treated with tender care by those who love him, and in both cases someone gives up what belongs to them for the Son's resting place. The animals lend him their feeding trough at his birth and Joseph gives Jesus his tomb at his death. Jesus left the world as he came into it, owning nothing. In the first instance it is his mother Mary who does the wrapping, in the second it is Joseph, not her husband, but Joseph of Arimathea, who was a member of the Jewish Council and high court. At Jesus' death, the bands of swaddling cloth are replaced by the finest linen and the manger is replaced by a rich man's tomb (Isa 53:9a).

**He was assigned a grave with the wicked,  
and with the rich in his death," (Isa 53:9a)**

Such actions foreshadow that this king, though initially rejected, will eventually be acknowledged by every realm of society, from poor to the rich, from the marginalized insignificant to powerful rulers. This "good news" will outlast death thereby remaining forever new and good.

#### IV. The Angelic Visitation to the Shepherds (2:8-20)

##### A. The Angel of the Lord Appears (2:8-9)

**And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. (2:8-9)**

The angelic visitation to the shepherds is significant for several reasons. In the Old Testament the image of a shepherd was a positive one to describe compassionate and sacrificial leadership of Israel's kings, especially David, also that of prophets and even of God himself. But by the New Testament times, the image had become tarnished by the rabbis who, in their efforts to intensify purity in Israel, listed shepherds among occupations that were considered "unclean," because tending and feeding farm animals would lead shepherds into the unclean Gentile territory and thus contamination.

Secondly, since the rabbis had redefined repentance as paying back in full any damage you had done to others, this made it impossible for shepherds to repent as they had no way of knowing all the damage their flocks might have inadvertently done to the fields of others. With no ability to repent they would be at the end of the line in the Messianic age to come.

Shepherds also represented the poor with no power or privilege. Though shepherds could own land, the tax burdens of the day were so great that most could not produce enough income to support their families from their holdings and were therefore forced to hire themselves for extra wages just to make ends meet. Given such a poor economic and social status, no shepherd would have ever expected a divine visitation, especially of this magnitude. Yet, the fact that it is to the shepherds and not to the rulers that the divine announcement is given, serves only to confirm Mary's song that the kingdom of God is being inaugurated by means of a grand reversal:

**He has brought down rulers from their thrones,  
and has lifted up the humble.  
He has filled the hungry with good things;  
but has sent the rich away empty. (1:52-53)**

On this night without warning, the glory of God broke into their world and "shone around them" as if for this moment, they were the center of the universe, as when Moses stood with God on Mt. Sinai. The language Luke uses of the angelic



appearance – the juxtaposition of the darkness of the *night* and the brilliance of the luminous glory of the Lord that *shone* is the language of a divine epiphany – and comes right out of Zechariah’s Song:

**because of the tender mercy of our God,  
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven  
to shine on those living in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the path of peace.” (1:78-79)**

#### **B. The Announcement of Good News (2:10-14)**

**But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ” (2:10-11)**

The unsuspecting shepherds are gripped in terror, wondering if they will survive the intense light, but the angel assures them that he has come with “good news” that will transform their fear into unquenchable joy, for the Savior of the world has been born. They are not told the name of the child, but rather his royal lineage and divine titles: “**city of David...Savior, Messiah...Lord.**” While these titles are laden with theological significance for Jewish readers (especially Isaiah 9:1-7), they are also dangerously subversive to Roman readers, who attributed these qualities to Augustus. Luke says, “There is now another ruler born, whose dominion is both universal and everlasting.” He is the true Savior, Messiah, Lord, which places the rulers of this world on notice.

**This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”” (2:12-14)**

“The wealth of these acclamations stands in contrast to the poverty of the sign.”<sup>5</sup> The Messiah is not wrapped in fine linen, but in “swaddling cloths,” and his resting place is not in the king’s palace in Jerusalem, but in a feeding trough in Bethlehem. Before the shepherds can come to grips with what they have just heard, the veil between heaven and earth is suddenly lifted to reveal a host of angels as far as the eye can see. They break out in song that resonates like thunder. “Glory to God in the

highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" Though short in length, it is the ultimate praise chorus and the appropriate response to what God has done. There is glory filling heaven and peace on earth with those with whom he is pleased. In Jesus' birth, God's mercy has fallen on the whole world.

### C. The Shepherds Response: Witnesses and Singers (2:15-20)

**When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (2:15-20)**

Overwhelmed with joy and their imaginations ignited by a spirit of revelation, the shepherds—the lowest of the low—are suddenly transformed into angelic messengers armed with a divine mission.

- Like the angels, **they leave** their normal abode for a higher purpose.
- Like the angels, they are **faithful to deliver the divine announcement** about the child.
- Having seen the child in the manger, they become passionate **witnesses**, telling all the significance of what they have seen and heard. God does not leave interpretation to chance.
- And finally, like the angels, the shepherds are not content merely to tell the story, for the story is too glorious to be confined to narrative, it must also be sung in **glorious praise**.

The fact that angels, who dominate Luke's beginning (12x), do not make another appearance in Luke's gospel (apart from 22:43) suggests that the transformation of the shepherds experienced is something God intends for all of us. For taking on the role of angels is what makes us most human and divine. That is good news that stays good and new. Amen.

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- <sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 8.
- <sup>2</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 84.
- <sup>3</sup> Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 10-11.
- <sup>4</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 31-33.
- <sup>5</sup> Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 135.