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Luke 1-2

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GOOD NEWS THAT STAYS NEW AND GOOD

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

What do you think of when you think of Good News? There is the Good News of success. In our family good news is when the Giants win or when a daughter says she just got accepted into college, or “I’m engaged,” “I got the job,” or “I’m pregnant!” There is Good News that rescues us from our fears, as when the doctor reports, “Your father will live,” or an anxious parent is told, “We found your daughter and she’s OK,” or a friend in financial distress hears, “I paid off your loan.”

Have you ever wished for the good news of a new start in life? Have you ever thought, “O how I wish I could start over! What a mess I’ve made of things. Is there a restart button somewhere? Can I do a clean install?”

At critical times in Israel’s history, when their world grew oppressive and morally dark, God intervened to subvert the existing order and grant 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’s faithfulness raising up deliverers and granting Israel a fresh start again and again throughout her history, 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, just as in the days of the judges, 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 new beginnings 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 birth narratives 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 climactic fulfillment in the person of Jesus. Though these stories are familiar to us at Christmas, we seldom appreciate them in their full context. Therefore, I thought it important to give one message reflecting on their significance within the context of Luke’s gospel and on the larger stage of salvation history. We will take them up again in more detail during the four weeks of Advent.

Luke’s beginning consists of 128 verses, which is the longest of all the gospel writers. Like all good introductions, it previews all the major themes in the gospel and Acts, and by application it becomes

the paradigm that shapes our spiritual journey. It reveals what being truly human and fully alive looks like.

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 – Zechariah the priest, Anna the prophetess – 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. 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).

I. Three Angelic Visitations

A. Visitation of Gabriel to Zechariah in the temple (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 eschatological messenger sent from God to help the prophet interpret visions regarding the last days (Dan 8:16; 9:21). Now, after several centuries God pulls back the veil between heaven and earth, and sends Gabriel as his messenger 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. They are also told the good news of the birth of Jesus, who is now given the title “a Savior, Christ the Lord.”

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 are introduced to a priestly family, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were “both righteous before God...but had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.”

“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.”
(Luke 1:13-15 ESV)

Gabriel breaks into Zechariah’s world in the place we would expect it, in the temple, and announces that his “prayer has been heard” and that his wife Elizabeth will bear him a son. These are

tender words by 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.”¹ The good news is as personal as it is global, something we will see time and time again in Luke.

Such a promise sounds incredible, but it is not without precedent in Israel’s history, considering what God did for Abraham and Sarah. But that is not all. Gabriel announces that this child “will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (v. 15), something which was 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 people 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 his hardness of heart, Elizabeth received the ability to conceive, and by the grace of God her status was restored among God’s people.

B. Visitation of Gabriel to Mary in Nazareth (1:26-38)

In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, the veil separated heaven and earth and is lifted once again and Gabriel makes a second birth announcement “to Mary, far away from the temple mount in Jerusalem, to Nazareth in Galilee – insignificant, despised, unclean.”² The angel greets Mary with, “Rejoice, favored one, the Lord is with you!” Joy is to fill her heart because she is the recipient of God’s undeserved grace. Such favor raises her status to that of the greatest leaders in Israel. The phrase, “I will be with you,” conveys much 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, “or when setting out on an undertaking that seems very likely to fail.”³ This was God’s pre-game speech to Moses before he sent him off to Egypt to confront Pharaoh. So now he gives the same speech to twelve-year-old Mary. 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. Called by grace with results that are guaranteed: now 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 the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” Gabriel’s words echo the language of other birth announcements, especially the one given to Sarah, (Gen 16:11) 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 bigger than your own, a world where God is ever at work in people’s lives to shape history and bring heaven to earth.

I grew up in a household of women: three sisters, my mom and a female dog. My father was a dedicated surgeon and was seldom

at home, so whenever a man would show up I would cling to him, wanting to throw the football, wanting to learn how to be a man. Then one day Bob Munson walked into my life. He was 6’3” with a handlebar mustache, sideburns and a flat top. He was a carpenter, truck driver, ex-football player and deer hunter – he was a boy’s dream. He was doing work for my mother around the house, and every day I would wait by the window, watching for his 1956 yellow pickup truck to appear; when Bob arrived each day my world grew large. Then he told me the best of news – one year hence Bob would take me deer hunting. He had entered my world and captivated me there, and now he was going to take me into his. For three years we went hunting together, and although I never got a deer, I didn’t care because I was in Bob’s world.

Those years with Bob foreshadowed for me the very way the gospel first penetrates and then redirects our lives. Jesus wants to come into our world and make it large with his presence, and then he wants to take us out of our world and bring us into his, show us what he is doing there and take us places we never thought we’d go. Fulfillment comes when the God of the universe calls your name and makes your world large. That’s what happened to Mary.

With the complexity of expectations whirling in her head, Mary asks, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” Unlike Zechariah’s, 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 Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” (1:35-37)

Although Mary has a role to play, the miracle will all be God’s doing. As 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.⁴

Gabriel concludes with a reminder to Mary of God’s omnipotent power. Those words ignite her memory of the Lord’s statement to Sarah in Gen 18:4: “Is anything impossible with God?” The word “nothing” is literally “every word” (*rhēma* – “word,” or “promise,” used 32 times in Luke), meaning that no promise of God will ever fail. When God makes a specific promise, no matter what it is, it will happen. With that final word, Mary’s faith leaps over the wall.

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

The personal and social cost to Mary in making such a commitment is difficult to comprehend, but her faith is revolutionary and becomes a model for all Israel. The result of all this 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.

What happens to Mary as Christ is formed in her womb is what happens to all of us when we are reborn. As Paul says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17 ESV). Then secondly Paul writes, "Hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom 5:5 ESV). There will never have to be another re-start because the Holy Spirit has now been poured out without measure to give us eternally new life.

C. Visitation of angel to shepherds in fields

I invite you to ponder the third visitation. Why three visitations? What did shepherds represent in the Old Testament? How did the rabbis consider them? What was their current social status? What meaning do you think Luke is suggesting by the scenic description of the shepherds "out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" (2:8)? Why is this visitation more revolutionary than the first two?

II. Three Journeys of Obedience

The journeys of obedience function as doorways to new discoveries and connections in God's new world. The **first** is the journey of Mary, who travels "in haste" from Nazareth to Judea to meet Elizabeth in obedience to the angel's sign. The **second** journey is when Joseph and Mary are forced to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem in obedience to the Roman census. The **third** journey is that of the shepherds who went in haste to Bethlehem in anticipation of the sign given to them by the angel.

Journeys figure significantly in the gospels and in Acts. Jesus has a very important journey to Jerusalem. Peter journeys into the Gentile world and Paul has three very important missionary journeys. You are on a journey too, an ever-expanding one. As you learn to be obedient to the angel's voice and to God's, doorways will open up to new worlds and new connections you never could have thought possible.

A. Mary's journey to Judea to her aunt Elizabeth (1:39-45)

Having been touched by an angel, Mary breaks with all social conventions to journey by herself some seventy miles to the hill country around Jerusalem to be with her aunt Elizabeth. As a young girl, Mary, would have never been allowed to venture outside the home without accompaniment, even in her own town, let alone travel clear across the country. She must have taken God's promise seriously that "the Lord would be with you!"

In spite of her at-risk adventure, Elizabeth responds to her greeting with enthusiastic joy, because of the larger realities that are developing in their respective wombs that transcend social and cultural norms. Three times Luke mentions Mary's greeting and the impact it has upon Elizabeth and the unborn John.

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." (1:42-45)

Upon hearing Mary's voice, the Spirit completely takes over and overwhelms everyone with joy, including the unborn John. This is the hallmark of the age of the Spirit – joy, even when we are suffering. In Mary's voice, John recognizes his Lord to come, and though he cannot speak, he manages to leap. Elizabeth is instantly filled with the Spirit and gives the divine interpretation of all that occurred, and blesses Mary for her obedience.

There is something remarkably new here. In previous annunciation scenes, when the announcement of a child was made to a barren woman, there was always the painful presence of jealousy between two rival women – Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah, and finally, Hannah and Penninah. But now, with the announcement of the coming of Christ and the Messianic age, we notice no competition between the mothers, but instead mutual respect and a deep affection for one another. Each woman rejoices in the grace given to the other, for in God's kingdom there is no need for competition, because we all uniquely complement one another with different gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:4-7).

And on some occasions the older and more experienced individual steps aside to bless the younger and less experienced as having a greater role to play, only to find their greatest joy in playing a supporting role. This will exemplify John's relationship with Jesus. Jesus says of John, "among those born of women there is no one greater than John" (Luke 7:28). John was the last prophet in Israel who came to anoint Israel's final King. His word was so powerful that "all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem" (Mark 1:5). But from John's point of view, his sole purpose was to prepare the way of the One who was coming, who was greater than he. John's motto was, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). This is the authentic mark of God's people in the age of the Spirit. Kingdom relationships trump claims of family.

B. Joseph and Mary Journey to Bethlehem (2:1-7)

The second journey occurs when Joseph and Mary are forced to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem in obedience to the Roman census. Joseph and Mary take the arduous seventy-mile trek in obedience to the oppressive governing authorities when it is anything but convenient. But, like you may have discovered, being faithful to our governing authorities can sometimes get you to the right place at the opportune time. For Mary and Joseph it opened the door to a whole new world.

The good news we serve doesn't deny the dark realities of tyrannical forces that dominate the world. Instead it subverts the old order in surprising ways and uses them to advance its purposes. Through the lens of faith, we are privileged to see that by complying with Caesar's decree, Joseph is actually serving God's greater purpose. Through the exercise of Augustus' greedy edict, God is able to transport Mary and Joseph seventy miles south from Nazareth to Bethlehem, just in time to fulfill the prophecy spoken by Micah seven centuries earlier:

**But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days. (Micah 5:2)**

Bethlehem, too insignificant to have status within Judah, doesn't even make it on Rome's radar screen, yet that is where God decreed that Royalty should lay its head.

The census reminds us that you can trust God in what you cannot control, even when it looks evil; Priscilla and Aquila, a Jewish couple who were forced to leave Rome because Claudius had expelled all the Jews, came to Corinth. Tentmakers by trade, they just so happened to meet Paul, who was in the midst of planting a new church. God used an evil edict to allow them to be discipled by Paul.

III. Three Songs of Praise

Following the three divine announcements there are three songs of praise. Praise is a response to awe. The first is Mary's praise, known as *The Magnificat*; the second is Zechariah's praise, known as *The Benedictus*; and third, is the angelic chorus of praise, known as *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. Actually there are seven Spirit speeches in this section.

Seven Spirit Speeches

- a Elizabeth's blessing of the Son
- b Mary's praise
 - c Zechariah's praise and prophecy
 - x **Angelic crescendo of praise**
 - c' Shepherds praise and glorify God
- b' Simeon's blessing and prophesy
- a' Anna's testimony to all concerning the Son

It seems as if Luke, seeking to preserve the sanctity of these opening chapters, only permitted speech inspired by the Spirit to have a voice. This is why Zechariah is mute and cannot speak until he obeys the angel's word and then is filled with the Spirit to prophesy and praise. Praise inspired by God's gracious activity in our lives is perhaps what makes us most fully human. Nothing fills the air with God's presence as simply and sweetly as when God's people sing their praises.

Four hundred of us experienced this kind of praise this past week at Laura Wilkinson's memorial service. Listening to Laura's friends – four incredible women – and Laura's two grown daughters bear witness to her life, I felt like I was listening to Mary and Elizabeth. Every single word came from the heart. It was like listening to four gospels of Laura's life, all meshing together in beauty. Time stood still and the air filled with holiness. I think that is why Paul commands us, "be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph 5:18-19).

IV. A Lifetime of Godly Character

The text ends where it began, with the godly character of the couple, Simeon and Anna. This frame is significant. In the book of Judges we observe that because the majority of the male population lacked faith and initiative, a powerful manifestation of God's Spirit was required to empower these reluctant leaders. Seven times in the book it is said that the Spirit of the Lord "came upon," "clothed," "began to stir," or "rushed, came upon mightily" upon a judge. The Spirit's empowerment became manifest in feats of mighty strength, but sadly it had no impact on a leader's character. Thus, the term does not speak well for the male population. Instead of an indicator of spirituality, it was in fact a description of God's grace "arresting men ill-disposed toward resolving Israel's problems and his equipping

them for the saving task."⁵ As a result, Israel sunk into the darkest depravity of her history. The message of the book of Judges is clear: Spirit (i.e. charismatic acts of power) without character = disaster!

You can sense the longing this created among God's people. "When will God raise up a leader with Spirit AND character?" The godly and elderly Simeon and Anna are a sign that it is now. After God poured out his Spirit on Pentecost, godly character became the hallmark of authentic spirituality. In the Pastoral Epistles Paul lists the qualifications for leaders in the church. For both elders and deacons, character takes precedence over "gift." Does a potential leader love his wife and serve his children? Is he or she well respected at work, especially among non-believers? Character is not only possible in leaders; it is mandatory. From the beginning when Christ raises you to life, all the way to the end as we face death, it is all about character. That is what these two couples exemplify.

In this new beginning, then, there are no cracks or moral flaws. It is good news that stays new and good. How long will it last? The book of Revelation gives us the answer.

And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal...And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (Rev 21:10-11, 14)

When you enter this City of beauty and holiness, you will see fully that all of God's New Creation was built on this new foundation. "For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 3:11).

1. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 8.
2. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 84.
3. Donald E. Gowen, *Theology in Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 65.
4. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 10-11.
5. Daniel Block, *Judges and Ruth* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 151.