

# Christmas According to Luke

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The question is where does the story of Jesus begin? The Gospels are big sermons after all. We think of them as documentaries on the life of Jesus, but they're not. The Gospels are proclamation, faith statements, "sermons". Each writer has their own perspective. Each evangelist chooses to tell some stories and not tell others. Each Gospel puts the stories of Jesus together in its own unique way - for a reason.

*The writers want to give their witness to the life and death of Jesus!*

*(Picture - St. Luke the Divine recording his history of Jesus.)*



The Gospel of Mark, for example, has no Christmas story at all. Mark 1 starts out, **"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"** Translated that means, *I believe Jesus is the promised messiah. His story starts out with Old Testament prophecy and the work of John the Baptist.*

Mark starts with Jesus' adult ministry. There is no Christmas story here because for Mark Jesus' birth is not important. **"Preparing the Way"**, though - taking Jesus into your heart - *that's important!!*

The Gospel of John is different again. John 1 reads, **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being."** For John the Jesus story starts way back at creation where God was at work for us as He is today. There is only one God and continuity was important for John. The birth of Jesus was not. John did not find in Jesus' birth the "signs" of his Messiahship so evident in other parts of his life. It is enough for John that we know Jesus was born **"not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."** (John 1:13)

Only Matthew and Luke begin their Gospels with a Christmas story. We say "a" because the stories are quite different. Forget everything you think you know about the birth of Jesus. Let's just allow Luke to tell the story the way he really wants to! Ready? Let's do it!



(Luke 1:1-4) **"Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed."**

Luke was a non-Jewish disciple of the Apostle Paul. As a convert to the faith he didn't have the Old Testament background we generally assume for Matthew, Mark or John. Luke's Gospel (and its sequel, the book of Acts) is written for a Roman dignitary names "Theophilus". The Gospel is also designated as an *"orderly account"* which means that Luke understands God to have worked in a unique way through Israel, but that the rules have now changed with Jesus. There is an "orderly progression" to the saving work of

God in history. Finally, while not obvious to those who don't read the original Greek, Luke is far and away the most sophisticated of the four Gospel writers. As we will see he is a wonderful story teller!

**So much for preliminaries. Now, on with the show!**

**(Luke 1:5-9) *"In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense."***

We won't spend much time with Zechariah and Elizabeth save to note that their story is an integral part of Luke's Christmas story as a whole. For Luke the Jews, Israel, are pictured as a long suffering and faithful people. Zechariah and Elizabeth embody the history of Israel as a whole. They live faithfully, act righteously, wait patiently - and like Abraham and Sarah they are in their old age without children. They are not without hope, however! Day by day they perform their duties in an ongoing faith that God will answer their prayers.

**(Luke 1:10-17) *"Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."***

The child promised here will be John the Baptist, a very important player in Luke's Gospel. John represents all that God has done and promised through Israel. He is the *"law and the prophets"* embodied. John - the incarnation of ancient Israel - points to Jesus as the promised messiah.

The touch of a master story teller is evident here. Notice that the presence of an angel inspires fear in Zechariah, as they always did in Old Testament stories. Angels were warriors, not cubby little babies or blond super models. Angels carried messages for God and such is the case here. The message is not unique. *Zechariah, Elizabeth, God is giving you a child and this child has a special place in God's plan for humanity!*

(Luke 1:18-23) ***"Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home."***

The similarities to the story of Abraham and Sarah one might recognize are no accident here. This is an ancient story, a familiar story. God intervenes in life for the good of all people. Like Zechariah we are always shocked and perplexed. How can these things be? Yet they are! Zechariah has made himself available to God all his life and now he has a special calling. If he does not fully understand so be it. God can still use him. However, if he doesn't get it he probably shouldn't be talking about it so the angel renders Zechariah mute. This will pass. In the meantime Zechariah can ponder was his first words might be next time around!

(Luke 1:24-25) ***"After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."***

***"Disgrace"*** - that is literally not having had any children, a sign of concern and possible disfavor with God in the eyes of Biblical people. Today we have a different understanding of infertility, but we understand Elizabeth's concern. How can one be part of the great cycle of life and God's love without children?



**Now to Mary!**

*(Picture shows the angel Gabriel announcing Mary's pregnancy.)*

(Luke 1:26-38) ***"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most***

**High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "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 holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God. Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.""**

Elizabeth's pregnancy is miraculous in an Old Testament sense. The process of pregnancy is natural. Only the timing is God's. Mary's pregnancy is miraculous in a different way! Gabriel (guardian angel of Israel) now visits Mary as he did Zechariah. She, too, is to be part of God's plan for she will be the mother of the Savior. Unlike Matthew Luke quotes no prophecy here, but like Matthew the virgin birth of Jesus is important. Our biology and understand and human fertility is different that that of the Bible. Jesus is not to be understood a "half breed", part human and part God. In the Bible the seed of life was believed to rest with men. Women, through pregnancy, nurtured that seed. This child will be God's Son. Mary was the vessel chosen to carry God's presence into the world.

**(Luke 1:39-56) "In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home."**

Interestingly enough Matthew and Luke each have their own way of lifting up the place and importance of women in the Christmas story. Here we find Mary and Elizabeth meeting to celebrate their roles in God's saving plan. More than that we find these beautiful words of Mary, often called the "Magnificat" spoken. **"My soul magnifies the Lord . . ."** Her words to Elizabeth are extremely political in nature. Mary says that

through her child God will **"scatter the proud"** and bring down the powerful **"from their thrones"**. For Luke Jesus is the one that brings a new social order to our world. The Gospel is not just a spiritual revelation. Hungry people will be fed, oppressed people set free. The Christmas story is about these basic themes of real life. In Luke's Christmas story you find a mini-version of his entire Gospel. Just as Mary **"magnifies the Lord"** so the life of the Church should do the same. If the hungry are not fed and the powerful overthrown Jesus is not the messiah!

*(Picture shows Mary, Jesus and a young John the Baptist - left with staff.)*



(Luke 1:56-80) ***"Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him. Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel."***

This is a long portion of text, but it finishes out the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Like Mary Zechariah has a little speech to give at the birth of John - and it is also quite political. John is to be part of a grand fulfillment through which Israel will be **"rescued from the hand of our enemies"**. This is not neutral language. The enemy is the Roman Empire.

### The story you know and love.

(Luke 2:1-5) ***"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child."***

***"In those days ..."*** What days? In the days of God's special children taking shape in the wombs of Mary and Elizabeth.



In the days of God's action on behalf of all people. Special days of spiritual stirring. In "those" days the rest of life went on as usual.

Augustus was emperor of Rome. Quirinius was governor of Syria. In those days the government wanted to register and tax everybody. Luke offers these names to place his story in time, but he also gives these names to place his story in the context of government abuse and greed. ***"In those seemingly hopeless days ..."*** God was active. The Jesus story is political for Luke, absolutely!

*(Two paintings of the nativity. The 'ox and the ass' are always present even though no Gospel writer ever mentions them. How come?)*



For Luke Joseph and Mary live in Galilee. They end up having their baby in Bethlehem because they are dislocated by an abusive government. As we will see they return home

as soon as possible. This is an interesting difference from the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew reads as if Bethlehem was always home. There is no taxation, no dislocation in Matthew. For Matthew Mary and Joseph are forced *out of* not *in to* Bethlehem. They must flee Herod's wrath and so end up living somewhere else. Bethlehem is obviously important, though. Both Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus' birth happens there. On this one point they agree.

(Luke 2:6-7) ***"While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."***

How many times have you seen or read about Mary and Joseph going door to door because there is "no room in the inn"? And how many children's programs fail to point out that the baby Jesus is wrapped in "swaddling cloth" and "laid in a manger"? There is poignancy to these two little verses. We like to figuratively kneel at the manger with Mary and Joseph. We like to visit with the shepherds. Yet this part of the story doesn't get much press. "No room in the inn, swaddling cloth, the manger" - they are almost off handed comments. Common fare, perhaps, for people under the heavy hand of Rome.

(Luke 2:8-20) ***"In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."***

See how much more press the shepherds get! This baby is born for them, for us, for the salvation of the whole world. And why shepherds? Because they are common folk. They're the graveyard shift. They are not among the privileged, the comfortable or even the respected. All through Luke's Gospel this theme will play. Those whom the world has overlooked God is lifting up - and those who add to the burden of the poor are in for trouble!

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is 76 verses long. The Christmas story here is only 20. What is Luke trying to tell us? Perhaps that God's planning and pain have deep roots. Perhaps that miracles happen in the most inconspicuous ways and in unlikely times and places. Matthew's Gospel pits faithful foreigners against the power hungry Herod. Luke's Gospel deals with food, shelter, the failure of governments and the needs of the poor. The two stories of Jesus' birth are different and the Gospels to follow build on the themes each author has introduced in "their" Christmas story. Christmas is their prologue, but if we're honest one thing is clear from both stories. Jesus' life will aggravate the conflict, whatever it is. In Jesus God is working out His plan of salvation and that plan moves right *through* whatever the world thinks is really going on. Luke gives us a moment to feel warm and comfortable at the manger (Matthew doesn't!), but don't get too comfy. It won't last!

### A final note.

The crèche, or nativity, is really the Luke Christmas story with the wisemen (from Matthew's Christmas story) added to it. Centuries of tradition have shaped Luke's story into the nativity scene we know today. Yet, the nativity is a blend, a combination of two stories that always fit together just exactly right. If you have enjoyed this study we offer similar notes for Matthew's Christmas story. Why not give that study a go, and then re-invest what you have learned in the figures of the Christmas crèche. That's what it's for, after all!



*(A painting of the "Presentation" from Luke chapter 2. In the Gospel of Luke after Jesus' birth his parents take him to the temple in Jerusalem to dedicate him to God. An old man named Simeon sees them there and says, "Master (Lord God), now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2:29-32) For Simeon the story may be over with the baby Jesus, but for Luke – and for us – it is only beginning.)*

