

A BUSY ANGEL
Luke 1:1-38

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For the next thirteen weeks, we will be in a series in Luke, wrapping up on Easter Sunday. Will you commit yourself to join me on this journey through Luke? While being here is best, if you're out of town one of those weeks will you go to our webpage and watch, listen, or read the sermon you missed?

Introduction (Luke 1:1-4)

Browse through any bookstore/coffee shop, and you will notice curious readers combing the shelves in search of their next "great read." Because we invest an enormous amount of time digesting the drama of a new book, we want to be sure that we will be captivated by the story line. To make certain that the long literary journey is not taking us to a dead-end destination, we quickly scan the jackets of books with catchy titles. Every good marketer of books knows that he only has about 30 seconds to grab the reader's attention. Thus, publishers put the most captivating contents of the book on the jacket summary, seeking to draw us beyond the cover to the full contents inside.

Ancient books, being recorded on scrolls, however, had no such means of marketing. Instead, the writers used the first few sentences of the scroll to capture the essence of the contents. The first sentences of the scroll were the door through which readers entered the ancient writer's work. Luke does no less. With his opening words, Luke lets his readers know that while he has read other accounts of Jesus' story, he himself has investigated the claims and consulted with eyewitnesses to tell the whole story in an orderly sequence. He desires for his readers to know the precise truth about Jesus.

Thus, Luke presents himself as an investigator who carefully weighs and tests both all that he has been told and all that he has read concerning Jesus. Confidence in his account, he asserts, comes from the fact that he has employed rigorous research. Although he has access to some other accounts which set forth the life of Jesus, Luke presents a new account which both builds upon previous works and confirms them with eyewitness testimonies. These various other accounts, which must surely include one or more of the Gospels of the New Testament (especially Mark), have been handed down by "eyewitnesses" and "servants of the word." The "word" for Luke is the good news message of Jesus and the hope that comes from his resurrection.

Our writer, Luke, uses two words to describe his process of investigating and reporting the gospel: "carefully" and "orderly." By "carefully," he means that he has investigated the reports and traditions concerning Jesus with the precision that might only come from a physician. With "orderly," he means that he is presenting the stories one after another, in sequence, to bring us to a full understanding—an enlightened understanding—of the person Jesus.

Theophilus is the one to whom Luke writes. While some speculate that Theophilus is only a symbolic name simply meaning “lover of God,” it seems quite clear that Luke is writing to a real person, perhaps even the patron who has borne the expenses of writing and distributing Luke’s carefully researched, orderly account. It is not just any Theophilus to whom Luke writes, but, rather, “most excellent Theophilus.” This title indicates that Luke is writing to a person with advanced status, perhaps even a Roman political official. While Theophilus has already received some instruction in faith, he is missing some of the key ingredients necessary to fully understand the place of Jesus in the plan of God.

I. From the barren, John will be born (Luke 1:5-25)

A childless, elderly couple (1:5-7)

With verse 5, we begin to move into Luke’s “orderly account,” as he orients us as to the specific time and place for God’s plan. Although his echoes of the Old Testament remind us that the story of God’s love for his people is much older than “the days of Herod,” he uses this description to locate his reader during the period of 37-4 BC and in a specific place, Herod’s domain—Galilee, Judea, Samaria, and beyond.

The first character named in Luke’s dramatic account is “a certain priest named Zacharias.” More specifically, Zacharias belongs to “the division of Abijah,” the eighth of twenty-four priestly orders. The couple is particularly distinguished by the fact that the wife, Elizabeth, also has a priestly heritage. Declaring their priestly stock and proclaiming them to be righteous, Luke wants to win our hearts for the two humble characters.

The first tragedy of Luke’s drama emerges; despite their priestly positions and righteous walk with God, Zacharias and Elizabeth are childless and too old to have any hope for a forthcoming son.

Luke’s opening saga echoes back to previous barren couples from the Old Testament story—Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 11:30, Isaac), Jacob and Rachel (Genesis 30:22-24, Joseph), Manoah and his wife (Judges 13:2-25, Sampson), and Elkanah and Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1-20, Samuel). Knowing the storyline from the couples of old, we are ready to expect God to step in and bring the barrenness to an end.

A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity (1:8-10)

Customarily, the daily duties of the priests were allocated based upon the casting of lots, based upon “the drawing of straws.” Using random selection increased the certainty that God was in control, rather than human design. We, therefore, can be sure that Zacharias’ selection was not “arbitrary decision,” but, rather, nothing less than the work of the hand of God. Being divinely selected to offer the incense, Zacharias would come as close to the presence of God as any person other than the high priest on the Day of Atonement—the one day each year when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies.

Luke reminds us that the people were gathered in prayer as Zacharias entered the temple. As we follow Luke’s orderly account, we will soon learn that when prayer occurs in Luke’s Gospel, God acts as he hears the cries of his people.

A divine visitation (1:11-12)

Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appears, standing to the right of the altar of incense. By mentioning the place of honor, the right side, and the altar, Luke is reminding us that this angelic visitation occurs in a sacred space, the sanctuary that connects heaven and earth. In this sacred space, God speaks through his messenger, who is later identified more specifically as Gabriel (v. 19, our very busy angel). As is common with men who encounter a holy presence, Zacharias is seized by fear (Isaiah 6:5; John 18:6).

A source of joy (1:13-14)

The first words from the messenger of God in this Gospel are, “Fear not.” The priest’s prayer has been heard, and God, as usual, is taking action.

While Lisa seized the opportunity to name all of our children, giving me little more than veto power over colliding combinations like Gertrude Gladys or Beulah Bertha, in Zacharias’ day, name giving was the sole right of the father (the good old days for dads). In this particular instance, it is the true father, God himself, who takes over the task of assigning this blessed boy his new name—John. The name, John, carries with it a message—“Yahweh is merciful.” The messenger makes clear that not only will the parents rejoice over John’s birth, but many will also be affected by his prophetic ministry.

Particulars about the prophet (1:15-17)

In these verses, we learn more particulars about the elderly couple’s surprise child. First, he will be great before the Lord, meaning he will do what is pleasing to the Lord. Second, he is to be controlled by the Holy Spirit and not by wine or intoxicating drink. Third, he is already filled with the Holy Spirit, even while he is in his mother’s womb. Fourth, he will be the one to call many of Israel’s sons back to their Lord. Fifth, he goes in the spirit and power of Elijah. Like Elijah before, John will bring a message of judgment and warning to a disobedient Israel.

Good news from the presence of God (1:18-20)

You’ve heard of doubting Thomas, but what about prove-it-to-me Zacharias? Zacharias demands proof so that he can be certain of the impossible—an old woman and an old man shall have a son.

The once anonymous angel now proclaims his name, bearing his credentials. He is no less than Gabriel, the angel of Daniel 8-9, who is trusted by God to reveal divine mysteries. Gabriel’s clearest credential, however, is the fact that he “stands in the presence of God.” Thus, Gabriel speaks with nothing less than God’s own voice. Gabriel, at last, reveals his true purpose: “To bring...good news.”

While the “gospel” or the “good news” is used in a way that sets us up to receive the ultimate good news of the birth of Christ, more broadly the good news is the announcement of the in-breaking kingdom of God as it is realized in human history. Oddly enough, Zacharias’ forced silence becomes the very sign that he sought, the proof he requested. With this sign comes the guarantee of God’s full promise.

Silence as a sign (1:21-23)

Transitioning us from an angelic visitation on the inside of the temple sanctuary, Luke now takes us back to the praying people on the outside. Most likely, they feared that Zacharias' delay is the sign of his demise. The holy place (and holy God) was not to be trifled with, and one was always in danger of death when he came into the presence of the sacred (see Uzza's story, 1 Chronicles 13:9-10).

Perceiving the priest's inability to speak, the people assume at once that he has seen a vision. His being struck speechless, however, represents more than just a divine visitation; it also represents Zacharias' disbelief in the message delivered by Gabriel.

The fulfillment of a promise (1:24-25)

In complete contradiction to her husband's hesitation, Elizabeth received God's favor with faith. Perhaps Luke is setting forth two possible responses to good news: a refusal to believe or a reception of God's favor. The forthcoming question in this Gospel is: How will Israel respond—with Zacharias' disbelief or with Elizabeth's belief.

II. From a virgin, Jesus will be born (Luke 1:26-38)

Following his orderly account, we arrive at the long-awaited place, the angelic proclamation that Mary will bear the very Son of God. The story of the second child is closely linked with the first. In fact, the "six months" ties the two stories together (see also 1:36). As Elizabeth's pregnancy progresses through six months of expectation, Mary begins her own journey, through the power of the Holy Spirit, in becoming a mother. Gabriel has been a very busy angel.

We see the similarities, but we must also remember that the two scenes are quite separate. Elizabeth is married and barren, hoping for a child. Mary, on the other hand, is still a virgin and has no such need or expectation.

While both the boys are seen as messengers of God, there is no doubt in this narrative which child is primary and which one is secondary. Elizabeth's child will come in the spirit and power of Elijah, preparing the people for the Lord (1:17). Mary's child, by comparison, is the Lord himself, the Son of the Most High God, whose kingdom will have no end (1:32-33).

A clear claim (1:26-27)

Making sure there is no mistake, Luke makes a triple reference to Mary's state as a virgin (see v. 27 (2x) and v. 34 (1x)). The Jewish reader could not help but hear the echo of Isaiah 7:14, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive...." "Engaged" was a formal, legal agreement which required divorce to be broken. Sexual contact and co-habitation, however, must wait for marriage. Luke tells us Joseph is of the House of David to prepare us for what is to come (1:32-33).

A special task (1:28-30)

Gabriel's opening words are proclaimed: "Hail, favored one!" As is often God's manner, he gives favor to one who has no real claim to status. He raises Mary up from a position of lowliness and chooses her to have a central role in salvation history. When Gabriel declares "the Lord is with you," he is using Old Testament language which refers to a person specifically chosen by God for

a special task in salvation history. Like Zacharias, clearly Mary is also fearful of the presence of the angel.

The final king (1:31-33)

The angel instructs Mary to name the boy “Jesus.” In Matthew 1:21, we are told that the name “Jesus” signifies that he will save his people from their sins. “Son of the Most High” carries the same meaning as “Son of God” (see 1:35). “Most High” is a reverent reference to God (compare Luke 6:35 with Matthew 5:9). The Lord, moreover, will give him the throne of his father, David (see 2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 2:7; 89:27-29; Isaiah 9:6-7; 55:3-5). Samuel delivered a covenant promise to David concerning his never-ending dynasty, and Jesus is the final Davidic King, the Messiah who will reign forever.

A response of faith (1:34-36)

Unlike Zacharias’ complete unbelief, Mary accepts the proclamation of the angelic messenger but ponders the possibility, given her virginity. The angel explains, “This child, unlike any other, will be the result of the Holy Spirit’s divine agency.” The Spirit of God will cause this child to be, despite Mary’s state as a virgin.

The God of possibility (1:37-38)

Among the greatest words of Luke we find those found in verse 37: “For nothing will be impossible with God.” Our God is the God who makes the impossible possible. There are no obstacles that can stand in the way of the will of God. At the beginning of the Jesus story, his conception, and at his death, his resurrection, God’s miraculous power overcomes the impossible.

Mary humbly and gracefully accepts the word of the angel and does not ask for any more proof or assurance. She accepts the statement as true—“Nothing is impossible with God.” She has, in fact, become a slave of the Lord, a statement, oddly enough, that shows both her obedience and exalted status as the one chosen for her loyalty and love.

Realistically enough, the angel departs. Brown, in *The Birth of the Messiah*, comments, “Such a heavenly presence has to be temporary.” The departing of the angel also means the angel does not hover over her to ease her pathway, to comfort her, or to explain her perplexing doubts. Mary faces the reality that being chosen as a messenger of God does not guarantee any ease, for faith’s journey is often a winding and troubling road.

Conclusion

Our God is the God of the impossible. He both causes the virgin to conceive and raises the dead to life. With him, the ax head floats (2 Kings 6:1-7), the river stands on edge (Exodus 14:21), and water bursts forth from a desert rock (Exodus 17:6). Do you believe Luke? Do you believe “that nothing will be impossible with God”?