



# Christmas in Luke (part 1)

## Luke 1

### 1. Zechariah (verses 5-25)

### 2. Mary (verses 26-56)

### 3. John (verses 57-80)

This Christmas season, we are following the counsel of Kevin DeYoung, who wrote an article entitled, "Pastor, Don't Get Cute This Christmas."<sup>[1]</sup> In the article, DeYoung encourages pastors not to seek any new novelty slant on Christmas, but rather to simply preach the same truths again. They are worthy to be heard again. That's what we are doing this Christmas season. I'm simply telling the story of Christmas from each of the gospels.

Two weeks ago we looked at "Christmas in Matthew" in Matthew chapter 1, where we saw the humanity of Jesus (through the genealogy), and the deity of Jesus (through the virgin birth). Last week, we looked at "Christmas in John," where we saw Jesus, who existed before time began, and stepped into time, as the "Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). This morning we will look at "Christmas in Luke." Actually, we won't get to the "Christmas moment" until this evening, when we look at Luke, chapter 2.

One of the things that has struck me as we have looked at each of the gospels is how differently they tell the story of Jesus. It's not that there are different stories. It's that there are different ways to tell the same story. The story of Jesus and his glory and of Jesus and his love. Matthew tells the story of Jesus with lots of Scripture and references to the Old Testament because Matthew was writing to Jews, who trusted in the authority of the Scripture. That's why it was so important for Matthew to begin with the genealogy, to show that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Scriptures. Mark, on the other hand, tells the story quickly, getting to the point in almost half the time of Matthew. A key word in the gospel of Mark is "immediately." And when it comes to the Christmas story, Mark ignores it all together. Luke, the doctor, is an historian. He tells the story with historical accuracy, taking great pains to get the details correctly. Luke's gospel is longer than all of the others, because he wrote with the aim to get it exactly right. John takes an altogether different approach from the first three. John isn't concerned with bringing everything of the life of Jesus into his story. He is strategic, sharing a few of his miracles, that we all might be convinced that Jesus is the Christ, and that by believing, we might have life in his name.

All that to say this, there is no one single way that the Bible presents to tell the story of Jesus. You can start in eternity past as John does. You can start with the Scriptures as Matthew does. You can skip the birth of Jesus all together as Mark does. Or, you can begin as Luke does, telling the story of two miraculous births, the birth of John the Baptist, and the birth of Jesus. Of course, each of the gospels end at the same place, with the unjust death of Jesus on the cross, who died for our sins, that we might escape the judgment of death through faith in him! Him taking the wrath of God upon himself rather than us taking the wrath upon ourselves.

Now, this morning, we will look at Luke 1, and all that leads up to Mary giving birth. Tonight we will look at Luke 2, the famous "Christmas Story," with Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem, where Mary gives birth to Jesus, who is laid in a manger. Both this morning and evening, I'm not going to try to be cute. Rather, I'm simply going to read the story afresh, and comment along the way.

So, if you haven't done so already, please open in your Bibles to Luke, chapter 1. I plan to read the entire chapter this morning, which will take some time in my message, as Luke, chapter 1 is one of the longest chapters in all of the Bible. But it will be good for us. So, hear it afresh.

The first four verses of the chapter are an introduction to the book of Luke.

#### Luke 1:1-4

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

With these verses, Luke is basically saying that what he writes is true. He wants Theophilus to know the truth of what happened in the life of Jesus. Please know, church family, that what we will read this morning is truly what happened. That's the point of Luke's narrative. To convince us of the reality of these things. All that we read about during the Christmas season of Jesus coming into the flesh as man, really happened. This is no science fiction story of someone's imagination. This is genuine history.

After Luke's introduction, he gets right into the story of the birth of John the Baptist, more than a year before the birth of Jesus. Now, by way of outline this morning, I simply want to trace out the major characters in the story.

### 1. Zechariah (verses 5-25)

This is where Luke begins his Christmas story, with an old priest named Zechariah.

We are introduced to this priest in verse 5.

Luke 1:5-7

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.

We are told here that Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth were righteous people, walking blamelessly before the Lord. We are told that Elizabeth was barren. Further, she was "advanced in years." The story continues in verse 8, with Zechariah performing his priestly duties.

Luke 1:8-10

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.

On this occasion, Zechariah was assigned the task of entering the temple and burning the incense on behalf of the people, who were outside praying. Zechariah was expecting to be alone in that sacred place. but he met a visitor.

Luke 1:11-12

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.

Of course fear fell upon him. You don't suddenly come upon an angel without fear in your blood.

Luke 1:13

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.

What a strange message the angel brought! Of two old people, long beyond the time of child rearing, to expect a child!? And not just any child, but a great child. The angel continues in verse 14.

Luke 1:14-17

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.

This child would be the one to prepare the way for the Messiah. Now, being a priest, Zechariah was steeped in the Scriptures. Being a godly man, he knew them well. He knew of the forerunner to come. He knew of the prophecies of Isaiah and Malachi. He was ready to embrace the one who came in the spirit and power of Elijah according to the prophecies. But Zechariah was not ready to embrace the fact that the forerunner would come from he and Elizabeth, being old and barren as they were. Thus, the question in verse 18.

Luke 1:18

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."

It seems like a legitimate question, but it lacked faith.

Luke 1:19-20

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."

It seems as if this is a bit unfair. Yet, God calls us all to believe. He will not tolerate our unbelief. As evidence that this would all come to pass, Zechariah was unable to speak, until the day when John was born.

Verse 21 takes us outside the temple.

Luke 1:21

And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple.

The people were outside the temple praying for Zechariah. They knew how long the other priests had taken in their duties. With the delay, they were a bit concerned. Verse 22 tells what happened when Zechariah came out of the temple.

Luke 1:22

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.

Can you imagine the scene? The priest enters the temple. He is delayed. He comes out not able to speak. Then, before the crowd he has to play charades to explain the delay and what happened to him. Can you imagine his hand gestures?

Finally, Zechariah retired back to his home.

Luke 1:23-24

And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. 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."

Elizabeth, the old woman, was blessed with a child. Her reproach of being a barren women, was taken away. And then, Luke shifts the scene to Mary. This is my second point.

## **2. Mary (verses 26-56)**

She too had an encounter with an angel.

Luke 1:26

In the sixth month

That is, in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy,

Luke 1:26-27

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.

This is the same angel who visited Zechariah in the temple. He comes with news of another miraculous birth. This time, the birth isn't foretold of an old woman. This time, the birth is foretold of a virgin, named Mary.

Luke 1:28-29

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

This isn't the sort of greeting that you receive every day. Wherever Mary was, whatever she was doing, an angel appeared to her, and she was troubled.

Luke 1:30

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

This is so similar to Gabriel's encounter with Zechariah in verse 13. There was a command not to be afraid. There was a blessing of good news.

Luke 1:31-33

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name 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 father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

The prophesy here is much the same that Zechariah received: Of a child that would be born. Of a child that would be great. Of a child that would be the fulfillment of the Scriptures. Like Zachariah, Mary was steeped in the Scriptures. We know this from the praise that she will give in verses 46-55. It's saturated with Scripture.

So, Mary knew the Scriptures. She knew of 2 Samuel 7 of the Messiah coming from the line of David, to come and reign forever. Again, like Zechariah, Mary was ready to embrace the message of the coming of the Messiah. But she didn't understand how the Messiah would come from her womb. In verse 34, she explains.

Luke 1:34

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

It's a totally reasonable objection. Virgins don't give birth. But the explanation comes in verse 35.

Luke 1:35

And the angel answered 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 called holy—the Son of God.

There's the explanation: It will be a miracle! Christmas is a miracle! "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and bring forth life from your womb. Thus, the child will be holy. Thus, the child will be the Son of God." This is the wonder of Christmas. That God would come as a baby in Mary's womb.

At this point, Gabriel told Mary of the other miracle that was took place with Elizabeth.

Luke 1:36-37

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.

Verse 37 is the key to the Christmas story: Nothing will be impossible with God. It is not impossible for God to bring forth a baby from an old womb. It is not impossible for God to bring forth a baby from a virgin womb. Any doubts that people have to the historical truthfulness of the events, are really reflections of a lack of faith in the power of God.

I love Mary's response in verse 38.

Luke 1:38

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

How different was Mary's response than Zechariah! She believed Gabriel. She resigned herself to God's call upon her life: "Let it be to me according to your word" (verse 38).

Then, we see the road trip.

Luke 1:39-41

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb.

Here these two "miracle babies" have their first encounter. John, the baby in Elizabeth's womb, sensed the arrival of Mary, who was pregnant with Jesus. John "leaped in her womb." By this time, Elizabeth has felt John move in her womb on many occasions, but this was different. This wasn't merely movement or a kick. This the baby "leaping" in her womb. Certainly, this ties back to the promise in verse 15 that he would be "filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb." Elizabeth recognized the significance of the occasion, by extending a blessing to Mary and a blessing to Jesus!

Luke 1:41

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, 42 and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!

Indeed, there is a sense where Mary is blessed among all women. For she experienced something that nobody else on the planet ever has, of giving birth to God. Indeed, Jesus was blessed of God. You simply need to read the rest of the gospel of Luke to see the hand of God's blessing upon his life.

In verse 43, Elizabeth continued in amazement at the working of God!

Luke 1:43

And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

Here Elizabeth is seeing the baby in Mary's womb as the Messiah. But even more than that, she recognized this baby as God in the flesh, calling the baby, "My Lord." This is the reality of Christmas, God became flesh to dwell among us. And here, Elizabeth recognizes it.

In verse 44, she explains and give yet another blessing to Mary.

Luke 1:44-45

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.

Indeed, Mary was a blessed woman because the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures, of the coming Messiah, would come through her womb. She would have the privilege of living with the Son of God in her own house. She would get to talk with Jesus, and learn from Jesus.

What follows is one of the most beautiful prayers in all of the Bible. This prayer is so significant, it has been given a name. This section of Scripture is called, "The Magnificat," and this name comes from the Latin of verse 46.

Luke 1:46

My soul magnifies the Lord,

In Latin, "Magnificent" is the Lord. Thus the word, "Magnificat." Mary begins with praise to God.

Luke 1:46-47

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

This is Hebrew poetry at its finest. Not based on rhyme and meter, rather, based on parallelism. That is, saying one thing, and then says it again in a different way. These first two phrases are practical parallels.

"My soul magnifies the Lord! My spirit rejoices in God." Often the difference between the two lines is the emphasis. The difference in these lines is the addition, "my Savior."

I have to make the subtle point here that Mary was a sinner, who needed a Savior. She was just like us. She was a daughter of Adam in need of Jesus to save her from her sin. I love the fact that her savior was in her womb.

I love the song, "Mary, did you know?"

Mary, did you know That your baby boy will one day walk on water? Mary, did you know That your baby boy will save our sons and daughters? Did you know That your baby boy has come to make you new? This child that you've delivered Will soon deliver you.

She knew that this baby was her Savior. Mary then transitions from praise to her humility.

Luke 1:48-49

for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

Mary knew her position before the Lord: She was a servant. Surely this is one of the reasons why God chose Mary, of all the women in the world, to be his earthly mother. Truth be told, this is what God is looking for in all of us. God is looking for us, in humility, to be his servant.

It's not so much great gifts that God is looking for as much as he is looking for a great heart of submission to him. Mary knew of God's blessing to her in this moment. She knew that God would do this great and mighty things through her, to bring the Messiah into the world through her. Mary knew that all generations would call her blessed. In fact, all across this world, this night, Mary's name will be mentioned in millions of churches around the globe. We will reflect upon how blessed she is.

This wasn't an arrogant statement from Mary. It was reality. It was the Lord's doing. After giving praise to the Lord, and after recognizing her low estate, Mary transitions to talk about the mercy of the Lord, which is the reality of what she has received from him.

Luke 1:50-55

And 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 mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

Mercy is mentioned in verse 50. Mercy is mentioned in verse 54. And everything in between these verses is an expression of God's mercy. Mercy toward those who fear him (verse 50), and Mercy toward Israel (verse 54).

God's mercy isn't toward the proud or arrogant. To those, he scatters (verse 51). To those, he has brought down (verse 52). To those, he has sent away empty (verse 53). God's mercy is to his people who fear him. To them, he shows kindness. He lifts the humble (verse 52) and he feeds the hungry (verse 53). He helps his people (verse 54).

This is Mary's life personified. My guess is that if you looked at Mary, you would not have been impressed. She wasn't the life of the party. She was quiet and reserved. She loved and served others. God chose her to be, as Elizabeth said, "The mother of my Lord."

Well, surely, Mary's time with Elizabeth was a special time as they both thought of the special babies in their wombs. I picture the special bond that forms when sister are pregnant together at the same time. It lasted three months, as verse 56 says.

Luke 1:56

And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

And now (in verse 57), our focus turns to my third point.

### **3. John (verses 57-80)**

I'm calling this section, "John," not because John does much in these verses, but because the focus is upon John. In these verses, we read of his birth, and some prophesies about his life. His birth comes in verse 57.

Luke 1:57

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.

This is the son that was promised to Zechariah. This is the promised forerunner to the Messiah.

Luke 1:58

And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

News spread like news of a newborn always spreads. There was happiness and joy and rejoicing at God's mercy to Elizabeth, who bore a child in her old age. According to Jewish custom, the child would be circumcised and named on the eighth day. This is what we read about in verse 59.

Luke 1:59-63

And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered.

This act of naming the child, "John" was a demonstration of the faith of Zechariah and Elizabeth. You can see the resistance of the people. Then, and today, people are often named for relatives. But there Zechariah and Elizabeth had no relative named, "John," though they insisted. And Gabriel's word from verse 20 was fulfilled.

Luke 1:64

And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.

After being unable to speak for nine months, I'm sure that Zechariah had stored up a few words to say. They weren't words of complaint or disappointment. They were words of praise. They were blessings directed toward God. We see the response of the people in verse 65.

Luke 1:65-66

And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

The people witnessed the miracle of Zechariah's voice returning. Certainly they remembered all that Zechariah had communicated about his time in the temple. Just because Zechariah couldn't talk didn't mean that he couldn't communicate. It may have taken some time. He may have had to write things down. But, certainly, the neighbors knew of the extraordinary circumstances of a pregnant old woman.

Zechariah would have communicated to those who inquired of the appearance of the angel (verse 11), of how he said that this child would be "great before the Lord" (verse 15). He would have communicated how he would be "filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (verse 15), or how he would come in the spirit and power of Elijah (verse 16). Of how he would "turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God" (verse 16) and how there would be revival in the land! And the people marveled.

Now, we are at a great advantage this Christmas season, because we know the rest of the story. We know that John the Baptist was great! We know that he preached to the crowds by the river Jordan. We know that he baptized many. We know that he came to prepare people for the coming of the Lord. But these neighbors didn't know it. All that they could do was marvel, and wait.

And perhaps some of the older neighbors even died before seeing these things fulfilled. But we have seen it all fulfilled in Jesus. The final scene in Luke, chapter 1 is the prophesy of Zechariah.

Luke 1:67

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,

Zechariah prophesies about two things: About Jesus and about John. You see the prophesy of Jesus begin in verse 68.

Luke 1:68-70

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

This is Messiah language! The Messiah would come and redeem and save! The Messiah would come from the house of David! The Messiah would come in accordance with all of the Old Testament prophesies!

What is amazing here is that Zechariah speaks in the past tense, as if all of this has happened. It's as if he sees no doubt that these things will occur. Indeed, they did occur in the life of Jesus. He did visit. He did redeem! He visited us by coming into the flesh. He redeemed us by dying on the cross for our sins! This is why there is great celebration at Christmas time, because Jesus came to bring us salvation.

Zechariah continues in verse 71, by talking about the results of the coming of the Messiah.

Luke 1:71-73

that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us

God promised to Abraham that from his seed would come a mighty nation that he would bless. The LORD said to Abraham: "I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:2-3). God promised salvation from our enemies, by his mercy.

Our response comes in verse 74.

Luke 1:74-75

that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Is this where this Christmas season finds you? Serving the Lord without fear? Serving the Lord in holiness? Serving the Lord in righteousness? Serving the Lord in all of your days? There are many things we can be fearful about: the future, health, finances, relationships, conflict. But do the right thing and serve the Lord without fear, all of your days!

I pray often that my kids would love and serve God with all their hearts for all their lives. You've heard me that a lot. I pray that you would serve God with all your hearts for all your lives as well. This is where Zechariah's prophesy leads us this Christmas season. It leads us to a holy and righteous life. It's where Jesus leads us.

Zechariah finishes his prophesy by talking about his own child who was just circumcised:

Luke 1:76

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

This all came true in John's life. He was called a prophet (John 21:26), and he went before Jesus to prepare his way. In Luke chapter 3:4, we read of how John the Baptist was the one written in the words of Isaiah the Prophet: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

John came to prepare the way by calling Israel to repentance. As is often the case when God moves in the lives of his people, there is a connection with repentance. When people turn from their sin and following after John and being baptized by him. John would say yes, you're being baptized and that's wonderful! That's a symbol of your forgiveness of sins. But look to him, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

John was a preacher. He was there, and he was a prophet of the Lord most high who prepared the way for the Lord. Verse 77 tells us why he was preparing the way.

Luke 1:77

... to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins,

He is telling them and directing them about how their sins can be forgiven. It all comes about because of the tender mercy of our God.

Luke 1:78-79

because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

It was the tender mercy of God that gave us John the Baptist. It was the tender mercy of God that Gave us Jesus. The sunrise imagery in verse 78 comes from Malachi 4:2. Giving light to those who sit in darkness in verse 79 is from Isaiah chapter 9. Scripture saturated in seeing the fulfillment of the Messiah in John preparing the way. It's the Christmas Story.

Then we read of John in verse 80.

Luke 1:80

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

You can read about his appearance in chapter 3.

Now, the stage is set for the birth of Christ, which we will celebrate this evening.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on December 24, 2023 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see [www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org](http://www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org).

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[1] <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/pastor-dont-get-cute-christmas>.