

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS ACCORDING TO LUKE (PART 2) ELIZABETH, ZECHARIAH AND JOHN

December 6, 2009
0900 and 1100hrs – JIM SHORT
Ladner United Church

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1 Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, ²just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, ³I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, ^{*} to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

5 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. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But 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. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for 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. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With 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.' ¹⁸Zechariah 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.' ¹⁹The 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. ²⁰But 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.'

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When 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. ²³When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴ After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' ⁶¹They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' ⁶²Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

⁶⁸'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty saviour* for us

in the house of his servant David,

⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,

and has remembered his holy covenant,

⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,

to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,

might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness

before him all our days.

⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people

by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God,

the dawn from on high will break upon* us,

⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

80 The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

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If you scripture diet is only what is read on Sundays from the three year cycle of the Common Lectionary – the appointed lessons so to speak – then this story of John’s birth to his parents Elizabeth and Zechariah – which is part of the “Christmas Story” is read only once and in part – so John’s birth is recorded but one misses all the rest of the story’s depth and beauty...

Let me recap briefly what we are doing over the next weeks...

We are putting aside the traditional Advent lessons to meander through the Christmas Story as it’s found in John, Luke and Matthew...

I did some introductory work last week – and you can find the sermon either on the website (www.ladnerunited.org) or some copies on the table by the front door...

Let me recap:

We needed three tools to understand the Christmas Story: (twitter version or depending on your age – the Cole’s Notes Version)

- a) They are not stand alone stories – nor are they the most important part of the Gospel – the death and resurrection is the finale and most of us get on Christmas Eve what I call Christmas Stew – a bit of Matthew and Luke lumped together and boiled up with John
- b) To not lose the story in the great debate about factuality – did it happen exactly this way or not – Let’s look at the Christmas stories as “parables” – stories that have a meaning beyond their factuality – a favorite teaching device of Jesus – or as a overture – and in a symphony an overture is the first piece of music that picks up little bits and pieces from the whole symphony and gives a foretaste or an overview...
- c) We have to read the Christmas Stories in the context of the first century life of the Jewish People and Jesus – they lived in the shadow of the Roman Empire...and the stories are purposefully set up to contrast Jesus and the Kingdom of God in contrast to the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus and the Roman Empire

We are going to look at the first chapter of Luke – this week Zechariah and Elizabeth and John – next week Mary and the Magnificat – Christmas Eve – the story of the First Christmas from Luke and Mary – and after Christmas – the coming of the Wise Men...

Who is Luke?

Luke was a Doctor/Physician and a companion of the Apostle Paul – writing around the year 85-90 (significantly after the Romans had destroyed the Jewish Temple about 70AD after years of rebellion – an event which impacted the Jewish people in a way 9/11 impacted the West) and he wrote both the Gospel (good news) of Luke and the Book of Acts – the history of the early Church immediately after Jesus' resurrection...

As he was not someone who knew Jesus personally he builds his gospel around the accounts of other witnesses...

Traditional Mainline scholars believe that Luke had a certain number of sources: he probably had a copy of the Gospel of Mark (written much earlier), another source that does not exist that scholars call "Q" – it's the material that is common to both Luke and Matthew as well as something called "L" – again which does not exist as a written document but accounts for the material found only in Luke...the first chapter that we will look at today of Luke falls into this category – only Luke of the four gospels writers tells this story...

Luke is educated and a good writer – and he incorporates passages and allusions from the Hebrew scriptures – he uses poetry, hymns, prayers, sermons, story and history and blends it into a beautiful narrative...

And if we understand the Christmas Story in Luke as an overture to his gospel

He introduces three key themes that will appear time and time again in the rest of the story of Jesus...

- a) Emphasis on the role and importance of women to Jesus – Women have names in Luke and play predominate parts – read Matthew's account of the First Christmas – Mary is a passive character who says nothing and much of the drama centers on Joseph's struggle with what to do contrasted with the role of the Wise ones from the East (presumably male) and King Herod - in Luke's First Christmas – Elizabeth, Mary and Anna have significant parts
- b) Luke's gospel is the gospel of the marginalized. Matthew records that the first people to come and visit Jesus are royalty – the Wise men – for Luke it is the shepherds who are the first to come and give their adoration – shepherds in 1st Century Palestine were not the cute pastoral figures of English literature – they were lowly, marginalized, considered uncouth and unclean and often thieves and brigands – yet such as these are the first to recognize the new king of Israel

- c) The Emphasis on the Holy Spirit – as a guiding leading presence – which shows itself as an Angel in Luke’s Christmas Story and shows up again and again in Luke and Acts...

Unlike Matthew and John – Luke does not want us to rush into the Christmas story like we are picking up fast food in the take out lane...

Rather – Luke invites us in the first chapter to enjoy a full course meal of different courses before we rush to Bethlehem to hear of the Savior’s birth

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Elizabeth and Zechariah had been married a long long time and they were no longer young...

Descended from the tribe of Aaron – Zechariah was by birth right on of the literally hundreds of hereditary priests in the Jerusalem Temple

They lived in hill country – a simple life – faithful and righteous before God following all of the commandments and regulations...

And they had no children...they had not been able to conceive a child...

The hereditary priests were divided into sections that did a period of two weeks of duty in the temple. It was a great honor to be chosen from your section by lot to enter into the Holy of Holies – the most sacred part of the temple where God dwelt – and to lay the incense on the fire and offer prayers for the deliverance of Israel and the welfare of God’s people while all around the temple in the various courts and areas - people prayed outside...

A priest could serve his whole life in his temple section and never have this honor...

But on this day – Zechariah was chosen...

Why is this so important: here history defines the significance...

For 500 years – the light of hope had been out in Israel...

For 500 years men like Zechariah, generation through generation had made that same sacrifice and God has been silent...and not answered the people of Israel’s prayers for freedom and independence...

500 years of servitude, crushing taxation, humiliation, slavery

A series of empires had overrun Israel

Babylon

Persians

Greek Empire of Alexander the Great

The Ptolemy's of Egypt

The Syrian Seleucids

and now Rome – through its vassal puppet King Herod – the so called King of Judah – the first Jewish King to sit on the throne for over 500 years and he was everyone's worse nightmare – a genocidal paranoid sociopathic maniac...

Corrupt

Degenerate

Apostate

Who introduced Roman Temples and Roman gladiatorial games

Had ruined the economy

And corrupted the Priesthood...

That is the historical context in which Zechariah makes his prayers that day...

And all of a sudden on the right side of the altar – an Angel Gabriel makes his first app

And Zechariah

Well – he scared and fear overwhelms him

And the angel begins to speak...

Elizabeth is going to get pregnant

And you will have a son...whose name will be John and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit

And like Elijah of old – he will be a great prophet (remember in those days - new things were suspect and ancient time honored religions were honored – so John stands in a long prophetic tradition)

His ministry – turn people to God...

and as Zechariah is listening – he’s doing the math and the biology on his age on his and Elizabeth’s age and he’s not convinced that this ain’t gonna happen...

And Gabriel says well – since you doubted...you are going to be mute and will not be able to speak until these things appear...as I read this – it is the ultimate extravert’s nightmare – you can’t speak

Meanwhile – everyone is out side waiting – wondering perhaps if he had a heart attack – but then figuring he must have had a vision...

And people must have been amazed because their had been no vision/appearance/word from God for 500 years but Zechariah was mute and could not say anything

When his time of service was up – he went home...and well – Elizabeth conceives and becomes pregnant (I am guessing since the text does not say anything different in the old fashioned way)

Again – going back into time – putting her and Zechariah on the same stature as Abraham and Sarah – the founding mother and father of Israel – who at an old age were told they would have a child and their descendents would form the chosen people of Israel...

Eventually Elizabeth gave birth to John – and people rejoiced...and when the eight day came to circumcise and name him

Which people assumed would be after his father which was the tradition...

Elizabeth said no – he is to be John – people were confused and Zechariah begins to gesture – and writes down on a tablet his name is John

And immediately Zechariah begins to speak...

And filled with the Holy Spirit – speaks what the text calls a prophecy – likely a hymn – we call it the Benedictus (one of three great hymns in Luke’s Christmas Story”

And identifies that his son John will be a great prophet who will point people to the Messiah who God has sent

"The one who will give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace"

There are all kinds of powerful messages in this story:

For 500 years – the people prayed to God in the temple and God did not answer...

Hopelessness

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Think and feel for a moment

Where in your life...the life of someone you know...the world do you sense

Hopelessness

You look and there is no light...

I don't understand God why this has happened to me

I don't understand why you don't answer my prayers

I don't understand why you are silent or where you have gone

I cannot see beyond my own pain and I cannot believe or imagine that I will get through this time or things will ever be better...

When there is only darkness and one cannot see any light – its damn near impossible to have hope

Its personnel – it's your story

But it's also communal...

Copenhagen and Global warming

Starvation

Remember last week – The Roman Empire promised peace through military might, warfare and violence – the Pax Romana

And Jesus promised peace through justice and the world has been heartily rejecting his ways ever since...

and yet 2000 plus years later...after 8 years in Afghanistan – working for peace through military might, warfare and violence and peace seems more elusive than it did eight years ago and certainly there is very little peace and justice for the average Afghan family...

Hopelessness...

Believing in hope in the midst of hopelessness requires almost an unimaginable miracle

Believing that the light will come in the midst of darkness is almost as absurd...

Yet...

Luke says...after 500 years of silence...God spoke through the Holy Spirit

At the very fringe of society...in the hill country – an old priest and his equally old wife...

Got pregnant...

And the glacier of hopelessness in the life of Israel that had formed after 500 years of oppression and silence...

Began the first signs of a slow melt...

How does God work...?

John and his cousin Jesus

Are born

Far away from the center of power in Rome and Caesar Augustus

Far away from the Temple and its Priestly Elite

Far away Luke says from the rich and powerful...

Sometimes it is so hidden that you have to look hard to see it

But Jesus is born into the normal avenues of the believing community

And for Luke – picked up in Acts

In the church – not the building but the people...

One of the things that church communities do is create a sanctuary – a place, a relationship

Where when we feel hopelessness – we do not have to hold that hopelessness alone

When we feel inside God's absence – church communities become a visible sign of God's presence...

I could tell you a hundred stories of Zechariah and Elizabeth miracles – of the light of Jesus that shines as John says in the darkness and the darkness – not matter how powerful or over arching cannot put it out

Signs of hope...

The person who every so many weeks leaves me \$100 – wants to recognition, no tax receipt, no accountability – just use it to help someone

Hope in hopelessness, a light that shines in the darkness that the darkness cannot put out – Jesus

last night as I finished my sermon the AA group was having its 52 Annual Ham and Potluck Christmas Dinner – well over 100 people and I was invited in for a plate and ended up sitting with two united church folks from another congregation in Vancouver – well Jim – we're people her who know hopelessness and sin and though our higher power we've found hope and a new life

Hope in hopelessness, a light that shines in the darkness that the darkness cannot put out – Jesus

If you think about it – you've got your own experience of the light that someone held for you in darkness or you held for someone else...

Hope in hopelessness, a light that shines in the darkness that the darkness cannot put out – Jesus

Thursday night – at the Light of Remembrance Service – our speaker Marlyn Ferguson – some of you will know her and her family and their story

...attends Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Parish – their son, caught up in drug dealing – at age 27 was horribly murdered

Now if that is not hopelessness...as she began to speak – I wondered how could anyone, any family survive that

And she was honest...about the hopelessness, and the pain, and the heartbreak and the despair and the grief...

What a story of the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it

- how did they face Christmas – one year on Christmas Eve the whole family traveled to Bowen Island on the Ferry wearing Christmas hats that lit up with flashing lights and sang jingle bells – put it on and we all laughed..

At the end of her talk – she said time does not heal all – but love does and I would interpret that to say Jesus does...

And after the service – I watched Marlyn – with tears in her eyes – hold the hands of another older woman and they spoke words I could not hear but I did not need to because I saw the other women's tears as well

and Marlyn took her lighted jingle bell hat from under her arm and she laid it in the hands of the other woman she was speaking to who began to weep profusely... this is my gift to you...

hope in hopelessness, a light that shines in the darkness that the darkness cannot put out – Jesus

That's the story of the First Christmas – it speaks as powerfully now as it did then to Zechariah and Elizabeth