

Christmas According to Luke

Luke 1 & 2

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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This Advent Season, we're looking at how each of the 4 gospel writers tells the story of Christmas. Last Sunday, we began with Matthew. Today, we turn to Christmas according to Luke. Luke's Christmas story was made famous by Linus.

Charlie Brown cries out, "doesn't anyone know the true meaning of Christmas!," Linus walks to the middle of the stage, drops his security blanket, and recites, from memory, Luke 2 from the King James version.

Luke is bigger than even Charlie Brown's Christmas. Luke's is a magisterial story. Luke is only gospel writer with a vision that expands into two whole books. Book One, the Gospel of Luke, is the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Book Two, the Acts of the Apostles, is Luke's depiction of how the Holy Spirit gets all up inside people to create new forms of community, we might even say a new kind of world. The Good News of Jesus Christ, according to Luke, reaches all the way to the end of the earth. Nothing—no obstacle, obstinance, no enmity, no empire—is too much for the Spirit of Love to overcome.

Where does Luke begin?

After a humble-brag of an introduction, Luke sets his first scene. "In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah." Luke tells you who is in power as this story unfolds. Herod is the client king who rules Judea, under the authority of Rome.

The power that emanates from Rome cast a long shadow over Luke's story, a shadow that goes at least as far as Jerusalem, to the Temple. There, Zechariah is performing his ritual duties, when he is suddenly visited by an angel named Gabriel.

In these very first scenes, Luke is showing us two systems of authority in the life of God's people—the Roman authority and the Temple authority. Two established powers that have become enmeshed; together, they shape and mediate the way people experience the world. Politics and religion are intertwined—they get to decide what is right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust. In every culture—including our own—there are institutions that mediate power and meaning.

Right in the middle of this nexus of authority, an angel of God appears to tell Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, will have a baby. The Hebrew God seems to be up to old tricks, repeating a miracle birth to Sarah and Abraham that first established God's covenant people. Elizabeth's baby will grow up to be John the Baptizer. He will be a prophet, like of old, reminding people of

our covenant with God and reminding us of the proper shape of human desire and the proper shape of human ethics that God requires of God's people.

But God is about to do something even more provocative than raise up a prophet. The main character in Luke's story, Jesus, comes, not from inside the Temple, not from the center, but from the margin, from a backwater town called Nazareth. Gabriel, the angel, appears to another woman to promise her a miraculous birth. The angel says to Mary,

"You are favored by God.... You will conceive and bear a son.... Jesus 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. Jesus will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

We hear these words and I'm guessing they don't mean much to you. All of these names for Jesus, all of these accolades, they have all been dulled by familiarity.

But these words, these names, are incendiary. They are Molotov cocktails. Luke says that while John the Baptizer will come to remind us of the faithfulness of God, the next child of Mary will come to bring God's Reign to earth. This child will be the one by which the Hebrew God wrests back control of the world. This child will be the greatest among mortals. A ruler. Not just a ruler—a human being who is the literal offspring of divine power.

A brief aside for some context. Here is an image of an inscription from a Roman building dating from 9BCE. It says:

"Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by **giving us [Caesar] Augustus**, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him **as a savior**, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, the **birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good news** for the world that came because of him.

The "Good News" of the birth of the One who has come to order all things. The One who is a Savior. Caesar Augustus. Hm.

This is a coin minted in 18BCE, with Caesar Augustus' image. It says "divus filius." "Son of the divine."

When Luke begins his story about Jesus, and he uses these names for Jesus—son of the most high, ruler over all—those titles *already belong to someone else*. Luke is telling you a story about one ruler who is about have their power usurped by another ruler.

It's not even subtle. The young girl who will be this new ruler's mother, sings what she knows to be true, based on her knowledge of the character of the Hebrew God, her God:

God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

God has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
God has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.
God has come to the aid of God's child Israel,
in remembrance of God's mercy,
according to the promise God made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Luke shows, Elizabeth the elder, and Mary the younger, celebrating God's revolution from below, the revolution that is gestating inside their own bodies.

Then, Luke turns to the birth of Jesus. He writes, "In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered." This is not Luke throwing in a historical detail. Caesar, the Son of God, decides that the people of Judea are going to be taxed. Consistent revolts in Judea caused them to experience excessive Roman taxes. Caesar is forcing people to relocate so that they can be counted and taxed to fund their own military occupation.

Joseph takes the unbearably pregnant Mary 90 miles, to Bethlehem. There, her labor pains begin. She gives birth in the courtyard of the guest house, near where the animals are mingling.

The Son of the Most High has been born. This is, you know by now, a world-altering event. The news must go out. It must be shared. To whom? Who should hear it? In the fields, there are shepherds. An angel of the Lord appears to them, saying:

"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 an animal's food trough."

Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom God favors!"

Heavenly "host," by the way, means "heavenly army." At Jesus' birth, there is an army of God's angels, who appear to day laborers in the fields, announcing to them the birth of a new ruler who will tear the powerful down from their thrones. At the very moment that the emperor is tightening the screws of oppression, Mary is giving birth to a new emperor: a new empire is dawning, the empire of God, and it is good news for the poor and release to the captives, it is sight for the blind, it is freedom for all who are being oppressed.

As Luke's gospel unfolds, he will show you that all of society bends towards the good news. He will show you that human beings—body and spirit—are liberated from one empire and delivered into another.

In Luke's world, there are two gospels. One says: "**Providence has sent us a savior**, Caesar, that he might end war and arrange all things."

The second gospel says: "The Hebrew God has sent us a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This child will end war and bring peace among all people."

Oppression or freedom. Violence or mercy. Exploitation or common wealth. The peace of Rome. The peace of Christ.

Two "gospels." Only one is true and only one is worthy of your life.

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