

## **What's the Real Story?**

### **Luke 1:1-23**

"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. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."<sup>1</sup>

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ."<sup>2</sup>

"An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of..."<sup>3</sup> well, you get the idea.

"Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative about 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, as one having a grasp of everything from the start, to write a well-ordered account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may have a firm grasp of the words in which you have been instructed."<sup>4</sup>

It's interesting the different way the Gospel writers begin the story of Jesus. John waxes poetic about the beginning of time and the Word that was both with God and was God through which all things came into being, giving light and life to all people. Mark minces no words and just gets right down to it—this is the beginning of the good news. Matthew gets real long-winded and goes on and on and on laying out the genealogy of Jesus starting with Abraham and going on for 16 verses until we finally get to, "Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, who bore Jesus, who is called the Messiah."<sup>5</sup>

Matthew, Mark, and John don't give any rhyme or reason for why they are writing the story or who they are writing it for, they just dive right in, each in their own way (and each of their gospels matter and reveal important truths and elements of who Jesus is).

Luke, however, does things a little bit differently. He doesn't immediately dive right in, but instead he begins by saying why he has taken it upon himself to give his own account and for who he is writing it for.

Luke is not the earliest gospel, he likely drew on aspects of Mark's gospel and the ever mysterious Q source that Matthew also used. But, he still thought it was important and

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:1-4 (NRSVue)

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:1 (NRSVue)

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 1:1-3a (NRSVue)

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:1-4 (NRSVue)

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:16 (NRSVue)

necessary to write the story of Jesus, and while it may seem he wrote the story for one single person—most excellent Theophilus, scholars debate this. The name Theophilus, means “friend of God” and is taken by some scholars as a literary device for addressing followers of Jesus in general or followers of Jesus in a particular community known to Luke. Other scholars, believe Theophilus to be a Roman official either informed about the Christian faith or a convert to following the way of Jesus.

I, personally, like to think Luke is using “Theophilus” to address all Jesus followers, all friends of God. Because Luke takes great care in his gospel to include and tell the stories of those who back then did not often have their stories told. Luke focused a lot on the supporting characters: women, foreigners, the poor, children, the elderly. Luke takes those whose stories are overshadowed and puts the spotlight on them, because it is those the world discounts, ignores, and pushes to the side that more often than not point us to Jesus. They show us the real story, the story of who Jesus really is, who he stands with, and how he is present, moving and working in the world.

I must admit a bias to y’all this morning—Luke is my favorite Gospel. The two probably most significant events of my life so far—my ordination and our wedding—used passages from Luke. Next week, Pastor Anita will preach on one of my all-time favorite Scriptures—Luke’s annunciation. I love Luke because he features so strongly right from the beginning the stories of Elizabeth and Mary and uses them as exemplars for faithful living. And he somewhat humorously does this at Zechariah’s expense, even though Zechariah should be one of the main characters.

Zechariah is a good priest, both he and his wife Elizabeth are good people who follow God’s commands. But, they had no children. And I will say I do have a bit of an issue with Luke here, because he puts the blame on Elizabeth for her and Zechariah’s inability to have children. It is because of her “barrenness” that they do not have children, which is how the inability to have children was thought of then. If a couple was not having children, it was always the fault of the wife. But, aside from their lack of children, they were a well-respected couple. They were good people who served God and their community.

One day, Zechariah received a great honor, his name was drawn to go into the sanctuary of God to offer incense to God. After burning the incense, he would emerge from the temple to the entire crowd of people and offer the priestly blessing over them. This is like the pinnacle of his career as a priest—most priests did not get chosen to do this.

Zechariah goes to the altar of incense within the sanctuary and there to the right of it, stands the angel Gabriel, and Zechariah was terrified. No one else was supposed to be in this most holy place! But Gabriel says, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.”

Zechariah and Elizabeth will have a child, and this child will be the one who gets people ready for Jesus. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, turning people to God, turning the hearts of parents to their children, turning people to the way of righteousness.

Now, Luke has told us that Zechariah and Elizabeth were an older couple. Elizabeth was likely in her late 30s, early 40s, but back then that was getting on up there, particularly when it came to having children. Because of this, it seems that Zechariah can't believe it is possible that he and Elizabeth will have a child.

But, Zechariah is a priest, a good priest, so he should know that for God, this really isn't a big deal, right? Zechariah knows the stories of his people. He knows that angels came to Abraham in the form of three strangers on the road and told him that his wife (who was pushing NINETY might I add, not forty) would bear a son. Sarah overheard and laughed because it seemed so ridiculous to her, and when she did laugh God speaks and calls her out for laughing at what God can do. Zechariah knows the stories of what God can do, and still he cannot believe it. Zechariah believes a different narrative, a different story—one where some things are truly hopeless, where nothing new can come from anything old, a story of scarcity instead of abundance, a story where even with God some things are just impossible.

Zechariah was a priest living in a land colonized and occupied by the Roman empire. He must have been exhausted. He must have been weary beyond belief. His people and his faith were not the people or faith of the empire. He and Elizabeth had been praying for a child, but I bet they were also praying for an end to the Roman occupation. They were praying for a reprieve. They were hoping for God to intervene somehow, someday and liberate their people.

Even considering all of what Zechariah is holding, Gabriel does not appreciate Zechariah's questioning, and in one of the pettier things that happens in Scripture, he takes away Zechariah's ability to speak. Zechariah will be able to speak again eventually, but not until all that Gabriel has said will happen happens. Zechariah has to take a step back, he will be a participant in the story, but his role will be to watch and listen. His wife, Elizabeth, will be the one who shows him, the righteous, good priest, how to faithfully respond to God.

There are a lot of stories that swirl around us all the time. Stories about certain groups of people or places. Stories that hurt and harm. We are always taking in different stories and narratives often about the same thing, but different people and entities tell them differently. Depending on what news outlet you watch or read, you'll have a different perspective on a specific story. The question we have to ask ourselves is what's the real story? Who is telling the real story?

It's not an easy thing to figure out, and there are so many conflicting stories vying for our allegiance, wanting us to believe that this is it, this is thing to believe and follow—capitalism, nationalism, empire, scarcity, greed, pride. But none of those tell the real story. None of those tell the story of liberating Love come down in human flesh. None of those want you to believe the story of what God can do.

This Advent, listen for the real story, so that you may have a firm grasp of the words in which you have been instructed. Listen to the supporting characters who show us how to faithfully

respond to God, who point us to Jesus showing us the ways of justice and liberation. Cling to the stories of hope even if it all seems hopeless. Look for the joy and give into it despite how weary you may be. Pray for peace with your hands and your feet, pray for peace without ceasing because our world so desperately needs it. Feel and share the love of God with each and every body, and know that they and you are beloved. This Advent listen and believe the real story—that nothing will be impossible with God.