

The Call to Prepare

Luke 1:1-25

Intro. Our message series during the four Sunday's in December is entitled, *The Call of Christmas*. Each dramatic presentation and message is coordinated to focus on the call of an angel to one of four main characters in the Christmas Story. This morning, we'll begin with Zechariah's Call to Prepare. In coming weeks we'll examine the call to Mary, the call to Joseph and finally, the call to the Shepherds.

To begin our series, let's turn to **Luke 1**. The first four verses of Luke's Gospel are actually one long sentence. Scott recited these verses for us. I want to read **vs. 1-4** again, but after that, I'll ask you to follow along in your own Bibles. These first four verses form...

1. Doctor Luke's introduction – vs. 1-4 - Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

The structure of Dr. Luke's introduction is almost identical to that of well-known first century writers. N.T. Wright has an interesting perspective on the opening of Luke's first letter as well as his second letter, The Book of Acts. He suggests that **vs.1-4** is like a solid stone entrance that in a most impressive way, welcomes you into a large building. As we enter His letter, he wants his readers to know the record he has provided is something solid we can trust. It's a serious, well-researched document. Notice a few details Luke included to make this point.

- First, Dr. Luke acknowledges others who have written accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. He doesn't claim his account is unique or superior to the others. In fact, despite differences of style and emphasis, there is amazing harmony between the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. This comes as no surprise since all Scripture is given by inspiration of God. **II Tim. 3:16** (By the way, do you know which Gospel is longest? How many think it's Matthew's Gospel with 28 chaps.? Wrong!...by verse count, Luke's Gospel is the longest.)
- Second, Dr. Luke appeals to *eyewitness accounts* and **things that have been fulfilled among us**. In other words, Luke as well as his first readers were alive when these things happened...some were eye-witnesses. In Bible times, there were no newspapers, books or media outlets. In the absence of these, word spread orally by official storytellers. When a noteworthy event took place, the story quickly spread around the villages where it would morph into an accurate, agreed-upon-form. Once the details of the story were set, no further changes or modifications were allowed. The event was codified by these recognized storytellers. If a storyteller went off script, the crowd would correct him.

An illustration might be found in the familiar poem, *Twas the Night Before Christmas*. Suppose I was to recite the verse this way...*"Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house. Not a creature was stirring, except for a mouse."* Immediately, you'd interrupt me and say, *"Wait just a minute...that's not how the poem goes!"* The same was true with the story of Jesus. The word was out and Christ's story was probably as well known to that generation as *Twas the Night Before Christmas* is to ours! If Luke's account was not accurate, those who were eyewitnesses and those who heard the codified story could have easily discredited his account, but they didn't. The absence of any ancient criticisms or denials affirms the accuracy of the NT record.

In **Acts 26:26**, Paul made a similar appeal when witnessing to King Agrippa. He said, **The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner.**

- Third, Luke said the **orderly account** he provided is the product of *careful investigation*. Luke was a Greek medical doctor. Men of science and medicine tend to be men of detail and precision. (You wouldn't know that from a doctor's hand-writing... but thankfully, pharmacists have the gift of interpretation.) So Luke's investigation was thorough and precise.

Why this introduction matters becomes evident almost immediately in this opening chapter. In the first paragraphs this Call of Christmas begins with the visit of an angel to a rather insignificant elderly priest named, Zechariah. Later he says the same angel, Gabriel, visited the Virgin Mary and after that Joseph, the young man she was engaged to marry. Finally a host of angels visited a band of shepherds. This reminds me of a fun show tune we sang in one of our Christmas musicals a few years ago. The song was entitled, Angels, Angels Everywhere! Do you remember it? *"There were angels, angels everywhere...with angel wings and angel hair...appearing at the twinkling of an eye...millions of them lighting up the sky...I was frightened as a goat and my heart was in my throat and I thought that any minute I would die..."*

But here's the point...none of Luke's first readers ever blinked at the mention of an angel. Except for the Sadducees, the Jewish people believed angels were real, credible and part of their historical records. And listen...though many believe angels are fictitious and mythological beings...the Bible affirms their existence from Genesis to maps. So there's no reason we shouldn't accept the veracity of Dr. Luke's account. When you know the whole story and that Jesus is the Incarnate Son of God, it seems unthinkable He would come to earth without an angelic announcement and escort.

- Finally, note that Luke wrote his letter to a man he addressed as, **most excellent Theophilus**. Though we know very little about this man, the Greek name, **Theophilus** means *friend of God*. **Most excellent**, seems to have been a title of respect that suggests he may have been some sort of government official. The purpose of Luke's writing is clarified at the end of **v.4... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught**. So Theophilus was a disciple of Jesus and Dr. Luke wants Theophilus and all his readers to know this record is accurate and trustworthy. It's not man's word anyway, it's God's Word!

2. A Righteous Family in Troubled Times – vs. 5-10

v. 5 informs us that these things happened **at the time of Herod, king of Judea**. Herod was a political monster. Under Roman rule, life in Israel was hard...but it was made even more difficult under the ruthless hand of this tyrant. **Gal. 4:4** says, **But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law...** Erich Sauer, the German theologian and historian, explains that among other conditions that made the timing of His coming optimal, Jesus came at a time of World demoralization. He writes, *"According to the descriptions of Tacitus, Suetonius and Juvenal, we cannot portray with adequate darkness the low moral state to which the aristocracy and highest State officials had sunk."* Sound familiar? *Debauchery and gluttony, subornation and poisoning, vulgarity and immorality, unchastity and licentiousness were the order of the day, especially in the middle of the first century.* Don't be misled about this...God is no "absentee-landlord" with respect to His creation. He is fully aware of everything happening down here. So God began to move His redemption plan forward when the time had fully come. Jesus and John who was born 6 months before Him came at a time of moral decadence and corruption. The world was ripe for the coming of that One who is **the way, the truth and the life**.

Now as God moves His plan forward, He often uses ordinary things and ordinary people. That was the case here. To the Jews, Zechariah and Elizabeth had neither the social or economic status to merit the privilege of being parents to any prophet much less, John the Baptist. The scholar, Alfred Edersheim notes that Zechariah's hometown "*was not in either of the great priest-centers—the Ophel-quarter in Jerusalem, nor in Jericho.*" Instead, he came from "*some small town in the uplands, south of Jerusalem...the historic 'hill-country of Judaea.*" One author suggests that Zechariah and Elizabeth were like a hillbilly priest and wife from the Ozarks. Neither his training nor his place of residence set him apart as someone special.

But notice how God saw this couple in ministry. **v. 6 - Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.** We shouldn't take this to mean they were perfect people or that they merited God's favor because they were so good. They were chosen for this honor because they believed God and demonstrated their faith by obeying His commandments. When they sinned, they dealt with sin the way God taught them to. They confessed sin and turned from it. They accepted God's forgiveness which at that time was based on the sacrifice of an innocent animal.

But notice...though they both were **upright in the sight of God, v.7 says, they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.** In that culture, an unfair and very painful stigma was attached to women who were barren and childless. For decades Elizabeth had to bear the whispers of those who pitied her as well as the criticisms of those who felt she must be guilty of some secret sin. "*Surely, she has fallen out of God's good favor! It's a wonder Zechariah has stayed with her all these years!*" So God's plan advanced in the worst of times, through an ordinary couple humbled by a deep disappointment. Yet they remained faithful to God.

Most NT believers know little about how the priesthood functioned or the fact that there were literally thousands of priests. As drawn up by King David centuries earlier, a **division** was one of 24 groups of priests. (**I Chron. 24:7-18**) The priests in each **division** were on duty twice each year for one week at a time. Zechariah belonged to the division of Abijah. Each day, when a **division** of priests was on duty, the lot was cast to assign the duties for that day. Because there were so many of them, it wasn't allowed that any one priest should burn the incense more than once in his lifetime. On the day in question, the lot fell to Zechariah. Wasn't that lucky? Zechariah won the lottery? No, it wasn't a matter of luck at all! In fact, the word "lucky" doesn't belong in a believer's vocabulary! The Bible says, **The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD. - Prov. 16:33.** With impeccable timing, God was moving His people into position to carry out His pre-determined plan.

The incense offering was brought into the holy place twice a day...early in the morning and again at about three in the afternoon. Sensing the gravity of this great once-in-a-lifetime privilege, Zechariah entered the Temple. Now remember, Zechariah is nobody special. He's a "hill-Billy priest" from a small hick town in the Judean hills. This assignment was the greatest moment in his life. He had to get it right! There could be no slip ups or failures to ignite!

3. The Angel Gabriel's Announcement – 11-17

I was tempted to call this section "*touched by an angel,*" but I thought better of it. Contemporary versions of angels and angelic encounters tend to be very misleading. In most Bible accounts, people who met an angel were terrified. Gilbert Morris writes, "*Funny thing, every time an angel appeared to someone in the Bible, the first thing he'd say was, 'Fear not.'* ... *I guess they were pretty spectacular.*" People often fell face down in the presence of a being that was so evidently super-human. So what do angels look like? It may surprise you to learn the Bible doesn't describe angel at all like they're typically depicted (you know, those floating little chubby babies with wings).

Most angels in the Bible have the appearance and form of a man. Many angels, like the Cherubim, have wings, but not all of them have wings. Some are larger than life. Others have multiple faces that appear like a man from one angle, and a lion, ox, or eagle from another angle. Some angels are bright, shining, and fiery while others look like ordinary humans. Some are invisible, yet their presence is felt and their voice is heard. But this much is certain, the Hollywood version is something less than terrifying and actually quite harmless.

Consider Clarence, in the Christmas classic entitled, *It's a Wonderful Life*. This kind but tipsy guardian angel who showed up to encourage George Bailey is anything but awesome or fear-inspiring! Or remember the TV series called, *Touched by an Angel* where Roma Downey is an angel named Monica and Della Reese is her angelic supervisor, Tess. Nice ladies, but not what anyone would rate as intimidating! And the winged angel figurines of art tend to emasculate and feminize angels. Yet I seriously doubt the mighty angel who neutralized Roman guards and rolled the stone from Christ's grave looked anything like these figurines. So there's wide disparity between the powerful, awe-inspiring angels of the Bible and the fictitious cupids of art and Hollywood. Tonight at 6 PM and then again at 6 PM on Dec.18 we'll examine what the Bible teaches about angels.

Just when Zechariah was about to light the altar of incense, an angel of the Lord appeared to him. **v.12** says, **When Zechariah saw him** (not her), **he was startled and was gripped with fear**. He was supposed to be alone in the Holy Place! No guests...no tag alongs. *"So what's this guy doing in here and where did he come from?"* If Zechariah was wired like me, his first thought was...*"Oh no! I've messed up. I'm toast. I've offended God. Any minute fire will fall and it will be Nadab and Abihu all over again."* (**Lev. 10:1, 2**) **But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.** The first words from an angel's mouth are usually, *"Get a grip...don't be afraid."*

Zechariah and Elizabeth probably stopped asking God for a child a long time earlier. From **v.18**, it would appear that Zechariah didn't believe it was biologically possible for them to have a child. He admits he's **an old man** and his wife...well, she's **well along in years**. (Notice that Zechariah opted for a safer choice of words. He knows a guy who calls his wife an *"old woman"* sleeps in the garage!)

But not to worry Zechariah, **your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.** But this son born to you will not be ordinary. **He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God.** Their son would be none other than John the baptizer...the one chosen to prepare the way for the Lord...the one of whom Jesus said, **I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist... - Matt. 11:11** Let this sink in Zechariah. Your son...the one you prayed and waited for these many years...will be the greatest man who has lived to date. You may have stopped asking but God didn't forget. **Your prayer has been heard** and kept on file until just the right moment. Here's a great lesson about the power of prayer. Though our prayers aren't answered immediately or on our time-table...God is faithful to hear and answer.

Now **v. 17** is pivotal. **And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."** Here the angel associated their future son with the promised messenger of Malachi who would appear to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. **Mal. 3:1, 2 - "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.**

Their son would be the one to fulfill this promise! Now understand this...heaven had been silent for 400 years. Malachi was the last prophet sent by God to speak to His people. The angel Gabriel broke silence of heaven with news more wonderful than you and I can imagine. He said, *“Zechariah, you and your wife will soon have a baby and you will call his name John. He will be great, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, and he will cause many to repent of their sins in preparation for the Lord’s coming.”*

4. Zechariah’s Unbelief – vs. 18-23

Like Abraham centuries earlier, and like many to whom God has made great and precious promises, Zechariah doubted such a thing was possible. Rather than believe the message, he asked for a sign. God can do that. He can accommodate our doubts. He can furnish us with affirmation when it’s His will to do so. But it always pleases the Lord more when His people take Him at His word without evidence or signs. **Heb. 11:1** explains what real faith is. It says, **Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.** Thank God for **II Tim. 2:13** which says, **if we** (who profess to believe) **are faithless, He will remain faithful...** In other words, *God’s faithfulness to do what He promises to do does not hinge on our faithfulness to believe it.*

Now angels are messengers of God. We see this in **v.19. The angel answered, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.** In **v. 20** we learn that Zechariah’s unbelief was not without consequence. **“And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.”** It’s serious business to doubt or refuse to believe messages sent from God. **Heb. 12:25** says, **See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?**

In **vs. 21, 22** the first game of Charades is documented. **Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.** I’m not sure what hand signals Zechariah was using to tell his story, but I imagine they were pretty wild and dramatic. The excitement on his face told much of the story. Notice the verb tense...**he kept making signs to them.** Like sometimes happens in the game of Charades, Zechariah’s best signals were unsuccessful and his audience wasn’t getting the message. Besides that...these people probably new old Elizabeth, (or should I say his wife who **was well advanced in years.**) The idea that this woman they knew and Zechariah would conceive and give birth was probably too far out to communicate much less take seriously.

v.23 says, **When his time of service was completed, he returned home.** Listen...God always accomplishes His purposes and fulfills His promises. Just because 450 years had passed since God promised to send a man to prepare the way for the Messiah, He had not forgotten. Even though Zechariah and his wife had stopped asking God for a child, and even though he doubted God...none of this could stop God’s plan. It didn’t even have the effect of a speed bump! God’s promises will be fulfilled in His own time and in His own way. Our disbelief can never prevent God from accomplishing his purposes. He does what He has purposed to do whether we believe him or not. So this opening section in Luke’s gospel ends with...

5. Elizabeth’s Seclusion – vs. 24, 25 – After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.

So Zechariah went home. In the course of time, Elizabeth became pregnant.

She remained in seclusion for 5 months. Some heady explanations have been offered to explain her seclusion. But I have a hunch the scholars who recommend these ideas were thinking too hard. The reasons for her seclusion may have been quite natural and normal. **First**, Elizabeth may not have wanted to announce her pregnancy until things were so obvious no one could deny it. After 5 months, she would have been sporting a pretty good mid-section bump. The parents among us know how eager we were to announce the news about #1. (maybe not so much #7...but...) Yet those who are older and wiser advised us to wait a few weeks until we were certain. No one would have taken her seriously if she announced her pregnancy too early. *"Oh, really? Did you hear that ladies?...Elizabeth thinks she's pregnant. Now I've heard everything!"* Elizabeth may have waited to avoid any additional whispers or scorn. Seclusion was a simple answer. A **second** reason may relate to propriety. Elizabeth would have had to explain her pregnancy and serve as spokesperson for her husband. Remember, Zechariah can't speak. He's dumb as a rock. What Elizabeth knows is based on her husband's hand signals. This reason can only be understood in the culture of the Middle East, but seclusion prevented her from having to assume a role that properly belonged to her husband. But these reasons are just guesses.

What's clear is the fact that Elizabeth had come to realize the personal and miraculous significance of the child who would soon be born to her. In **v. 25** she says, **"The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days He has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."**

Conclusion

What can we take away from this text of Scripture?

- First, we learn that God is working to bring about amazing things for His people. He was bringing to pass new things in the lives of people who loved Him. He was beginning to fulfill the New Covenant promised centuries earlier through the prophet, Jeremiah. He was setting everything in place so that His people would be ready to repent and receive His good news.
- Second we see God sovereignly setting the stage and putting everything in place. The birth of Jesus would be the next great act. So, God's plan was unfolding perfectly as it always does. This should give us confidence as we wait. Even if at times the Lord seems silent, He still is at work bringing about His perfect and loving plan. Do you see your life in light of God's faithfulness? Dave Hatcher writes, *"In every work of God there is great purpose, perfect timing, and a story being written. God does not make mistakes; He is never too late; He loves to surprise and terrify and delight. He pours out individual and very personal mercies and all the while He is actually molding and shaping nations and all of history."*
- And God didn't just send John and Jesus. He sent other prophets and apostles. He sent His messengers through whom He speaks His Word to the world. Today, we are the messengers and witnesses through whom God speaks. Yet He comes to a people who are prepared for Him, a people whose hearts have turned to Him. His grace is manifest in the work of His Word and Spirit preparing men and women – for His arrival.
- The question for us is this: *Are we ready for the next work of God?* What if the next work of God is to send Jesus back to earth the second time, are you ready? What if the next work of God is to send some trial your way to strengthen your faith, are you ready? What if the next work of God is to answer that prayer you've been praying for what seems like decades? As the angel said to Zechariah, ***your prayer has been heard.*** Are you ready?