

December 2, 2007  
 To Make Ready a People For The Lord  
 Malachi 4:1-6 / Matthew 11:1-15 / Luke 1:1-25

I have to begin today by telling you I have changed my mind with relation to my preaching schedule. After I finished Job I mentioned to you that I would give you a break and preach a series through a "small" book of the Bible, like Philemon. Since its only 25 verses long, I figured I could finish it in a year or so. (Just kidding, of course!) Could probably do it in a month!

Yet, since I covered in my series on the church some of the things I would cover in a series on Philemon, I began to veer away from that idea. Not to mention I just finished a short 9 week series last week! So, what I've decided to do instead is go through Luke for Advent and Christmas (as I had planned), and then just keep on going right through to the end of Luke's Gospel.

And I'd like to go through Luke for three specific reasons:

**1<sup>st</sup>)** Because I've found that in evangelical churches preaching series through the Epistles, are far more common than series through the Gospels, leaving their people well-versed on doctrinal issues, but lacking in regard to their knowledge of Jesus and what it means to have a Christlike character. And even when evangelicals did preach from the Gospels, it seems they focused almost exclusively on passages dealing with His birth, death, resurrection or deity.

It's one of the reasons a friend of mine could once say, ***"Why is it that I find most Evangelicals to be more "Paul-like" in character than Christ-like in character? Isn't the goal of Christians to be "Christ-like" in character?"***

I couldn't give him an answer then. But I would now venture to say it results from a neglect of indepth preaching series that go through the Gospels from beginning to end. Preaching series through Epistles abound, but series through the Gospels are far fewer in number — at least in the evangelicalism of the past generation.

2.) I believe that because of that we as a people need to become reacquainted with Jesus, and hopefully through that deeper acquaintance with Him, fall in love with Him all over again just like we did at first. And through coming to love Him more, take on more of His characteristics: Loving as He loved / Striving for a heart of compassion just like His / Reaching people the way He reached them, and the type of people he did — sinners and

religious strays and social outcasts / Con-fronting religious hypocrisy and Breaking down racial prejudices and calling into question time honored religious traditions of human origin.

And Last) I'd like to preach through the Gospels because often times it's easier to grasp spiritual truths when they are spoken in narrative form, using stories or verbal word pictures like parables, than when they are presented in the form of analytical, structured, logic-based, point with sub-point argumentation.

So, that's WHAT I intend to do, and WHY I intend to do it — starting today with the Advent passages of Luke, going on to Christmas story of the incarnation of God in Christ, and then on from there into the rest of the Life of Jesus — or as one has called it — “The greatest Story Ever Told.” A series I'll entitle “Painting Portraits of Jesus.”

So, as I begin, let me do what I did with Job (and every other book I've ever preached through) and give you a little background information about the author, the book, its intended audience, and its content — all of which are spoken of in verses 1-4.

In terms of the **AUTHOR**, this Gospel does not specifically say who it was written by, though from earliest times it has been attributed to Luke, the same man who wrote the Book of Acts, and probably around the same time — somewhere between 63 and 68 A.D. In fact, in Acts 1:1 he refers to this book which we call the “Gospel of Luke” as “my former book” or “my first book.”

Luke was of Gentile origin / was well-educated / a very capable historian / and a physician by profession. In Col. 4:14 Paul calls him, “***Our dear friend Luke, the doctor.***” In fact, because he writes in polished, classical style Greek (as opposed to Mark whose Greek is much more elementary), uses medical terms, and is an acquaintance and traveling companion of Paul (Acts 16, 20, 21, and 27), the early church fathers were led to attribute this Gospel to him.

In terms of the **BOOK** itself, Luke says he wrote it for the purpose of giving to a man named “Theophilus,” “an orderly account (or record)” (v. 3) 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” (v. 1-2).

This tells us many things. Luke was not an eyewitness to the things he writes about in this book. He was a Gentile convert to Christianity who later on went around collecting the information or stories contained in this book from those who were eyewitnesses, and then arranging them in an orderly, chronological, fashion.

Theophilus was apparently a rich Greek man who paid Luke a living wage while he went around finding, speaking with and collecting the stories and information contained in this book from the “many who had undertaken to draw up an account of the things fulfilled among us” regarding Jesus life and ministry. Such people as Peter, John, John-Mark and others who had been with Jesus from the beginning.

Theophilus (who was himself a Gentile convert to Christianity), apparently asked Luke to write him a fuller, and more complete account of the life and times of Jesus than he could find in the Gospel of Mark, which had already been written, yet is much smaller, gives no account of the events leading up to the birth of Jesus, very little information about the resurrection, and almost nothing about what happened after His resurrection)!

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In terms of the **INTENDED AUDIENCE**, Luke’s Gospel is obviously written to a Gentile or Greek audience — Theophilus and others like him being the primary intended audience. This differs from Matthew’s Gospel which was obviously geared to a more Jewish or Hebrew audience which had a far greater familiarity with the OT.

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And in terms of its **CONTENT**, the introduction to the Book of Acts says it all: *“In my former book, Theophilus (the Gospel of Luke), I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day He was taken up into heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the Apostles He had chosen.”*

Not only that, but he also says in v. 4 that his purpose in doing this was so that Theophilus, *“may know the certainty of the things he had been taught.”* He had obviously been instructed in the Christian faith at a time when there was yet no New Testament written. And Luke’s purpose in gathering all this information was to provide him (and us who would come after him), with an accurate historical account that could help him (and us) know with certainty (because it was gathered from eyewitness sources) that these things are true.

I hope you come to the same conclusion. We live in an age where EVERYTHING about the faith is being called into question, and Christianity itself is under great attack from all sides (even from within) causing many to question the validity of their faith. And Luke wants you, like Theophilus, to know the certainty (or truthfulness) of the accounts contained in this book! He wants you to know they are verifiable, confirmable, and historical in nature!

So, with that as our introduction, let's take a look at where the story of Jesus begins. And as we do, we find it DOESN'T start with the birth of Jesus, but prior to the birth of John the Baptist! For scripturally speaking the story of Jesus can't be told, apart from the story of his immediate predecessor (and cousin) John the Baptist.

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Today we begin Advent, and "Advent" means "the coming," or "the approach"—the time just prior to the arrival of Jesus. And what the last book of the Old Testament had plainly told God's people was that before the Lord came, someone would come to "prepare the way for Him." They would know that Jesus was soon to come on the scene, when they saw His predecessor come on the scene!

In Malachi 3:1 God says, *"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...."*

It was a message the prophet repeated again (one chapter later) in the two concluding verses of the Old Testament: *"See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."* That was the last authoritative word written to the people of Israel and it was penned some 400 years before Jesus was born!

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So what were the Jews to look for? They were told to look for the Lord to come. Yet they also knew from these passages that before the Lord, or Christ would come, a "messenger had to come to prepare the way." A "messenger" God identifies as "the prophet Elijah," who would come to do the preparatory work of restoring all things, turning the hearts of the fathers to their sons, and the sons to their fathers.

And you know what? All the Synoptic Gospels unanimously declare that John the Baptist fulfilled BOTH of those prophecies! He is the "messenger" of Malachi 3:1, who would prepare the way for the Lord, and he is also "the Elijah" of Malachi 4:5, who would turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to their fathers.

The angel tells Zechariah that very thing in verse 17 of this passage! After telling Zechariah his son would grow up to dress like Elijah, and eat what Elijah ate, he then tells him he would also do the job which Scripture says Elijah would come to do!

Speaking of John the Baptist the angel says:

***“And he will go before the Lord, in the spirit 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.”***

And that’s not all! In Matthew 11:9-12, Jesus Himself speaks of John the Baptist and says: ***“And what did you go out into the desert to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’”*** In other words, according to Jesus, John the Baptist fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi 3:1!

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And as if that weren’t enough, Jesus seals the case in Mark 9:11-12, where He speaks with people who have heard His claims to be the Messiah, yet doubted if He could be, because the teachers of the law kept telling them that Elijah had to come first — the same Elijah who had been taken up into heaven alive in II Kings 2:11!

That’s how they refuted Jesus claim to be the Messiah. “He can’t be,” they would say “because Malachi 4:5 says Elijah must come first, and he obviously has not!”

So these people say to Jesus: ***“Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?”*** And Jesus answers their question this way: ***“To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things... But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him.”***

Who was he referring to when he said “Elijah has come”? John the Baptist! Something He repeats in Mt 11:14. Speaking of His cousin John, Jesus says: ***“From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it... And if you are willing to accept it, he (John the Baptist) is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear.”***

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You see, if John the Baptist was NOT the Elijah who was to come, then Jesus could not be the Messiah who was to come! Because Scripture makes it very clear that Elijah must come first, and prepare the way for the Lord. A prophecy that Jesus, and the Angel (in today’s text), and all the Gospel writers with them, considered to be fulfilled in the person and ministry of John the Baptist!

A point, by the way, that assures us that some aspects of some prophecies are fulfilled in a non-literal way. John was not Elijah, but he did fulfill the prophecy about Elijah and carry out the role of Elijah. And in this regard Jesus interestingly says: *"He who has ears, let him hear."*

Which brings us back to the text at hand and the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth:

Zechariah is a priest. He has a wife Elizabeth who cannot bear him children. She is barren. And now they are both "well along in years" (v. 7). We aren't told how old they are — maybe in their 60's — him in his late 60's and her in her early 60's.

All we know is they are beyond what any rational, astute, educated, well-informed human being would know to be the natural time or age for childbearing. They were at an age which would cause anyone to say: "They missed out. It's too late for them. Her time has passed. It's no longer biologically possible for her to have children."

Yet Zechariah is about to be told otherwise. He's a priest, and he's "chosen by lot" to go into the Temple, to the altar in front of the Most Holy Place, to put fresh incense on the altar, and make sure it is lit. And as he performs this duty an angel of the Lord appears to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense — and Zechariah, we are told, *"is gripped with fear"* (Vv. 11-12).

Why is he "gripped with fear"? Probably because he thought he was about to die!

You see, he was going into the inner recesses of the Temple, right in front of the Most Holy Place where God's Holy Presence dwelt. In fact, it was a well-known fact that if anyone entered into that place, with sins not atoned for, would be struck down by God. That's why, before any priest went into that place, the other priests would tie a rope around their ankle, so that if he were struck dead by God for entering into His presence with sins that were not atoned for, they could drag his dead body out using the rope!

And Zechariah knows this full well! So with this rope around his ankle he enters the temple, probably anxious, moving slowly and cautiously, and looking around the massive darkened room as he nears the altar. And then, as he begins to put the incense on the altar, an angel appears to his right! And being a priest he knows full well that angels (in scripture) are not always friendly! Sometimes they are sent to carry out judgment upon a person!

In Num. 22, the Angel of the LORD stands in the road, sword drawn ready to strike Balaam dead for his disobedience! In II Samuel 24, the Angel of the Lord stretches out his hand to destroy Jerusalem, and many die. And in Isaiah 37 the Avenging Angel of the Lord is sent from God to destroy the Assyrian armies encamped around Jerusalem, and puts 185,000 Assyrian soldiers to death in one night.

In other words, the appearance of an Angel is not always to bring tidings of great joy! So when Zechariah (rope tied around his ankle to remind him that the Lord will not tolerate unforgiven sin in His presence) sees an angel materialize on the right side of the altar as he is replacing the incense, he is terrified!

Or as we might put it, he is overcome with a sense of dread — not sure which task the angel has come to perform. And seeing his dread the angel reassures him he has not come to carry out a sentence of judgment, but to convey a message of blessing.

Verses 13-17: *“Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. 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 from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 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.”*

So what does all that tell us?

**1<sup>st</sup>)** That God sees the desires of our hearts. He hears our heartfelt prayers, even if they are only whispered under our breath, or offered up to God as a silent yearning of the soul.

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**2<sup>nd</sup>)** It also tells us that God loves to do miracles! He especially seems to enjoy doing them for the most unlikely of people! The least likely of characters! He does!

Instead of picking a young, healthy, virile couple in their 20's to bear the baby who would fulfill the role of the Elijah who was to come. He picks an old, barren couple, well along in years — barren old Elizabeth, who felt that her barrenness was a sign of God's disfavor (v. 25), and by this miracle lets her know she is immensely favored — choosing her to bear a son who would be a joy and delight to her and Zechariah / great God's eyes / and prepare the way for the Lord.

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And **3<sup>rd</sup>)**: It tells us the miracle Zechariah wanted so badly, was not dependent upon his faith. It's wasn't! If the miracle had been dependent upon his faith, he never would have received it, because when the angel told him that he and his wife were (old as they were) would still have a son he did NOT believe the angel.

What then was the miracle conditioned on?

The same thing all miracles are conditioned on! The Sovereign Mercy and Grace of God and NOT human merit! He would be stricken with an inability to speak because of his unbelief, but he would NOT lose the blessing of having a child in his old age because of his unbelief.

The desire of his heart would be given to him despite his doubts or difficulty in believing that God could, or would do it for him. God would bless him, not because he deserved it, but merely because God is gracious, and had chosen to bless him!

You see, though God often asks His people to believe Him for, or ask Him for a miracle, many do not. You know why? Because we've often been sold a false bill of goods by religious zealots or super-Christians with a pharisaical bent who tell us we must be deserving of it, or we must somehow make ourselves worthy to receive it. We must have an extraordinary degree of faith, or faith untarnished by any degree of doubt or uncertainty. And if we don't, they say, then God either cannot, or will not, do anything for us.

And since most of us know we are not "worthy" (and could never become worthy enough to deserve anything from God), and since we also know we don't possess a faith that never doubts, we never bother asking God for the miracle our heart desires. We simply reason that, "If those are the preconditions that need to be met for God to do a miracle for us, He would never do it for us anyway — so why bother asking."

**But can I say THIS TEXT clearly tells us otherwise?** Here we find a very ordinary, rational, man of faith, yet a man, who like us, struggles to believe that the miracle he's always wanted could actually come true (even though the angel tells him it will)! He doubts he can have what he's always wanted, because it sounds "too good to be true!" Maybe he's dared to believe people before when they told him he'd have a child, and has been disappointed so many times he doesn't want to risk it again.

You see, I've often told my children — (especially when it comes to monetary scams) — "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is." I tell them often, because there are many con-men out there just waiting to pounce on even the slightest sign of trust, or faith, or naïveté or gullibility in people.

(I once received an email from a lady in Nigeria telling me her husband had died, and she had hidden fourteen million dollars worth of his gold bullion in the ground. He had come into it illegally, but now she had become a Christian and loved the Lord Jesus, wanted to give it to

someone who would use it for the Lord's work. All I had to do, she said, was send her my bank account number and she would deposit all of it in my bank account!) Believe me, "Sometimes, if it sounds too good to be true, it is!"

And the problem is, we learn that lesson so early and so often in this fallen world, that it can make us (like Zechariah) skeptical or cynical, even when it's an ANGEL or GOD Himself who tells us the unbelievably good news! You can only get taken so many times before you become skeptical of really good news — even if that "good news" comes from God through the lips of an angel!

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But, you know what? I believe God knows, and understands that! I believe this story shows that! God knew, before He ever sent the angel, that Zechariah would disbelieve the promise. Yet it didn't stop Him from sending the angel anyway! Nor did it cause Him to revoke the offer when Zechariah disbelieved.

And I'm NOT suggesting God doesn't care whether we believe or trust Him! Quite the contrary! The fact that the angel strikes Zechariah with the inability to speak because he doesn't believe shows that God expects us to believe Him when he speaks to us!

You can't disbelieve God without calling into question either His truthfulness, trustworthiness, faithfulness, power or integrity! And that dishonors Him, because He is more than worthy to be trusted and believed!

Yet the Gospel message is that God is also gracious, and understanding, and stoops to our weakness. He knows our failures and chooses to bless us anyway! We, who like Zechariah, deserve to be cursed and have the miracle revoked for the sin of unbelief, actually find ourselves receiving it anyway! *Not because we're DESERVING, but because God is unspeakably GRACIOUS.*

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Thus I ask YOU: What's the secret desire of your heart? Do you have one like Zechariah's, that's always there, and always has been? A desire that has never gone away, and even grows more desperate the older you get, and the more unlikely it seems that it will ever come true? Something that's now so unlikely to happen, that only a MIRACLE could ever bring about?

And **LISTEN**: I won't tell you "You can have it if you'll just have enough faith, or can eradicate all doubt." That would contradict the plain and clear message of this text. (Plus, who am I to say what God will or must do?!)

No. I can't tell you "God will." But I can tell you this:

If God does (and He very well may if it requires a miracle that would display the riches of His grace!)... if He does it will not be because you are deserving, but because He is gracious. Not because you have great faith, but because He is a great God! Not because you have been able to eradicate all doubt, but because He wants to show you He's worthy of your trust.

He does ask us to believe and trust Him for miracles, but it's not the perfection of our believing that brings His blessings upon us, it's the greatness of His grace and mercy to us in Jesus. When He speaks, believe! But even if you struggle to do so, it doesn't mean He will withhold His miraculous blessings from your life.