

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Luke 1:5-25
“How To Build A Prophet”

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(3rd Sunday in Advent)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

LUKE 1:5-25, "HOW TO BUILD A PROPHET?"

Impediments

Birth Events Are Prelude, Herod The Great 37-4B.C.

1) vv.5-7 ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH: PRIESTLY, RIGHTEOUS, OLD AND BARREN.

5 a *And it happened* **"in the days of"** Herod, king of Judea, a) v.5 Characters, b) v.6 Character, c) v.7 Circumstances
 there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah; 23:27-28, 37-4BC, Move To Semitic Style From 1:1-4
 and he had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was **Elizabeth**/ 8/24 Divisions, 1 Chron. 24:1-19
 6 b And they were both righteous before God, //I Sam. 1:1-2, Gen. 18:11, Credential: Lineage/Piety
 Barren walking in all the commandments and ordinances of **the Lord** blameless./ Gen. 17:1, Age Honor, Best Of Judaism, 2:25
 7 c But **they had no child**, v. Dt. 7:14, Is. 47:9, Barrenness Not Due To Sin In This Case
 Old because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. Ancient Understanding, Dt. 28:4, 11, Hopeless Sorrow
 //Isaac (Gen. 17-18), Samuel (1 Sam. 1-2), Move From Years/Days/Hours/Moment Of Revelation

2) vv.8-23 ANNUNCIATION BY GABRIEL, ZECHARIAH'S DOUBT/JUDGMENT.

Type = Angelic, Saving Birth//O.T., Dream/Vision Narrative

a) vv.8-10 Zechariah's Temple Service Begins/ People Outside Praying.

God's Providence

8 *It happened* while he was serving as a priest before God when his division was on duty, Ex. 30:1-8
 9 according to the custom of the priesthood, Whole Burnt Offering For Sin, m. Tamid 5:2-6:3
 Odds it fell on him *by lot* to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. Last Act, Holy Place, 2x Daily, Acts 1:26
 10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. Faithful People, Ps. 141
 Prayer: Setting For Divine Revelation

b) vv.11-12 Unidentified Angel Appears/ Zechariah is Fearful.

We See Inside

11 And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing at the right side of the altar of incense.
 12 And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and a great fear fell upon him. //Dan. 9:20-27, 10:15
 Acute Emotional Distress

c) v.13 Conception Announced to Zechariah.

Gen. 17:19, I Sam. 1:3, 17

13 And the angel said to him, Not Just Child But A Prophet, Destiny Beyond Family
 "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, God Speaks, 18:7-8, Acts 1:14,4:2,10:31
 and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John (gift of God).
 Father Typically Names, Prophet To Israel

d) vv.14-17 Gabriel Proclaims John's Significance: 3 Stanzas.

9 ands

14a S1a And you will have joy and gladness,/ God's Providence/Angelic Prophecy
 b and many (all) will rejoice at his birth,/ Not All, But Implications For All
 15a c **AND HE WILL BE GREAT BEFORE THE LORD**// Jesus, 7:28, Sir. 48:22
 b S2a And he shall drink no wine or strong drink,/ 7:33, 1 Sam. 1:11, Lev. 10:9, Num. 6:3
 c b **and he will be filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb**,/ 1:39-45, Jer. 1:5
 16 c **AND HE WILL TURN MANY OF THE SONS OF ISRAEL TO THE LORD THEIR GOD**//
 17a S3a And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah,/ Mal. 3:1, 23; 4:5-6, Sir. 48:10
 b b and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, Conversion: Heart
 and (turn) the disobedient to the wisdom of the just,/ Mal. 2:6, Right Living
 c c **TO MAKE READY FOR THE LORD A PEOPLE PREPARED**// = Jesus, Is. 40:3
 John As Prophet/Evangelist, Not Messiah, 1:76, 3:1-6

c') v.18 Conception Questioned by Zechariah.

I am old// I am Gabriel!

18 And Zechariah said to the angel, Gen. 15:8, 17:17 (Abraham's Question)
 Unbelief "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."

b') vv.19-20 Angel Identified/ Zechariah is Struck Dumb as a Sign, Acts 13:11.

19 And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel who stand in the presence of God; Dan. 9:21; Tobit. 12:15
 and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. = 1:68 God Visits His People
 20 And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things come to pass, 1:64
 Judgment because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." Trust, Not Prepared!
 Punitive Sign

a') vv.21-23 People Outside Waiting and Wondering/ Zechariah's Service Ended.

21 And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and the wondered at his delay in the temple. Num. 6:24-26
 22 And when he came out he could not speak to them, and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple;
 23 and he made signs to them and remained dumb./ And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

1') vv.24-25 ZECHARIAH & ELIZABETH: PROMISE FULFILLED/ ELIZABETH'S RESPONSE.

24 **After these days** his wife **Elizabeth** **conceived**, and for five months she hid herself saying, Prophecy No. 1 Fulfilled
 25 "Thus **the Lord** has done to me in the days when he looked on me, to take away **my reproach among men**." Gen. 30:1

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 1:5-25

The next thought unit (1:5-25) is complex and demonstrates Luke's skills as a narrative theologian. From the language of Greek prefaces (1:1-4), the style shifts abruptly to an Old Testament ethos with many direct and indirect references to patriarchs, matriarchs, prophets and temple rituals. The terms of inclusion which open and close the thought unit are "In the days of" (v.5) // "After these days," (v.24), Elizabeth" (v.5b) // "Elizabeth" (v.24), "the Lord" (v.6b) // "the Lord" (v.25), "they had no child" (v.7) // "conceived... take away my reproach" (v.25). The first hearers were alert to such auditory cues, and Luke supplies them. The surface structure of 1:5-25 is an elaborate 9:1 concentric structure or chiasm (1-2a-b-c-d-c'-b'-a'-1') with a single center. At the core in d) vv.14-17 is the angel Gabriel's three-stanza prophecy of John's vocation, and at the center a critical phrase, "and he will be filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb" (v.15c), indicating John is a prophet from the start. The third line of each stanza (vv. 15a, 16, 17c) is a statement about John's relationship to *THE LORD*. A new prophetic voice is to be heard three decades hence. Themes of divine providence, promise and fulfillment, human faithfulness and weakness, liturgical worship, angels as messengers, and prayer are prominent. This is dense, carefully formulated material which stands at the hinge between the Old and New Testaments. A space is being prepared for Jesus the Lord.

While the surface structure is concentric, the model for the story (i.e. its *literary type* or *genre*) is the Old Testament pattern where an angel appears to announce a saving birth. The ten parts of the standard pattern are used in the announcement to Zechariah concerning John (1:5-25) and the parallel annunciation to Mary concerning Jesus (1:26-38), thus demonstrating the continuity of God's actions. Luke's pattern is to give us a panel about John, then a parallel panel about Jesus. In each case John's work is preparatory and Jesus' work superior; in other words, John's work is to "make ready for the Lord (i.e. Jesus) a people prepared" (v.17c). What God did with Hagar and Sarah and Manoah, God now does with an old priest and a young maid. Two boys will change the world and die as martyrs; only one will be raised! That Luke could dictate using multiple patterns and subtle cross references is an indication of skill.

Luke begins with a political dating just prior to 4B.C. at the end Herod the Great's reign. Here we meet the best of Jewish piety, Zechariah and Elizabeth, whose priestly credentials are matched by obedience. If anyone is *blameless* before God in the law, they are. But there's an anomaly. They have no child, and in those times barrenness was a big status issue, even a curse. Their status before God is not matched by their status in the community. They have empty arms and a hole in their hearts.

Twice a year Zechariah's priestly cohort of 700 was on duty, and the 50 needed to carry out special duties were selected by lot. The lot fell on him for a once-in-a-lifetime privilege. He would enter the Holy Place outside the Holy of Holies and spread incense on the altar while the people prayed at the afternoon sacrifice. It was prayer in action with smoky perfume! This was part of the twice daily sacrifice for sin. Suddenly Gabriel appears to the right of the altar. Zechariah is unnerved and undone. After being calmed, the messenger- straight from God's presence- gives a speech about a long awaited son. So important is the boy that God reserved the naming. The central speech (vv.14-17) is poetic in structure with each third line indicating the prophet's relation to God: *great before the LORD; turn many... to the LORD their God; make ready for the LORD a people prepared*. But Zechariah, priest and good man that he was, shows a lack of trust in asking for a sign with the response that he was sealed off without speech for nine months for a long retreat. Upon his return, Elizabeth finds herself pregnant, the miracle being the restoration of lost biological capacity. Dad is incommunicado, and mom hides at home. God disturbs life. What's next?

HOW TO BUILD A PROPHET?

“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard.”

Long delayed answers are always a surprise.

L U K E 1 : 1 3

By the time we arrive at today’s extended paragraph from Luke, we’re well into a long, complicated decision tree. And it begins with a property basic question, basic because it determines so much else that follows, and the question is this: Is there a God? If the answer is No, the result is naturalism or secularism, a widely held view that the universe is all there is. What you see is all you get; life is a big cosmic accident of matter plus chance plus time, and what meaning there is you make up on your own because in the end there is no permanent significance to anything. Death is the end. You appear; then you vanish. No more you! Your little story and the big story of history have no goal or purpose. It’s a long train to nowhere, and religion— all of it— is just another illusion, something people make up to keep from facing an impersonal universe and its blind, cold, indifference. And that is one way to read life.

Many find this world view convenient because it supports radical personal autonomy. I am my own law, my boss, and there are no constraints but social conventions and the laws behind them. No one’s watching or keeping score. No final accountability. No parent in the sky. No binding rules, just surviving as best you can and hoping for some good times at the top of the food chain. So create your own reality. What are you but one more mammal with no special status, an evolutionary accident slithering around on the planet? In the words of cosmologist Stephen Hawking, you are *chemical scum*.¹

¹ David Watson, “Theological Anthropology, FTW,” davidfwatson.me/2016/12/07/theological-anthropology-ftw.

But if there is deity, then the next question is, How many? And if more than one, you're a polytheist, meaning *many gods*; and if only one, you're a monotheist, meaning *one and only one God*. And with this decision you are now a Jew, a Christian, a Muslim, or a philosopher with a Prime Mover or First Cause, and not a Hindu or nature worshiper or Wiccan. Polytheists and Monotheists—oddly enough—share the conviction there is an invisible world other than the visible; we just differ on who runs it, a CEO or a committee. Polytheists relate to many centers of power and loyalty, monotheists finally to only one. It's a lot simpler but much more demanding to live before an audience of One! No pantheon to placate, no bets to hedge, just One to whom you are accountable for what you do with the gift of life.

Then comes a fateful fork. If there is one God, what is God's relationship to all this stuff and to little ole me? And if you use the loaded word *creation*, you've already made a decision that a very powerful and smart someone made it all; it *was created*, and the passive voice indicates a someone, a personal agent with effects. But if the stuff had no beginning, then it's also eternal alongside God, and that poses a problem of one god or two since both had no beginning and are self-existent alongside one another. So now there's not only one self-existent reality, but two; and if two, why not three or more, and we are soon back to polytheism, many competing god and goddesses, each with their own band of followers and devotees. It's either none or one or many, and all have implications for all that follows. Ideas matter, especially ideas we have about who's out there and up there, if anyone.

But if you think one God made it all, likely from a flash of light and power billions of years ago in a Big Bang from the Big Banger, you take another step down the decision tree. The one God is the Creator who made it all from nothing. No pre-existent raw material. Matter had a beginning, as did space and time, and so when we find evidences of design, it makes sense; it's as we would expect. Science, whether it looks at very large things through a telescope or at very small things through a microscope, traces the work of a great engineer from top to bottom with math as its universal descriptive language. The watch did not pop into existence; there was a watchmaker. Fiddle the dials just a bit at the Big Bang and the conditions do not yield us. It appears someone set all the dials

ahead of time; all the cosmological constants are pre-set on a razor’s edge for the emergence of beings like us. In a November 25 *Washington Post* article titled “Humanity is Cosmically Special: Here’s How We Know,” Howard A. Smith of Harvard’s Astronomy department, admitted that we are– in his words– *cosmically special*.² Carl Sagan is spinning in his grave. It’s an article worth reading because it notes that the consensus is shifting against the old orthodoxy of us not being special but only an insignificant oddity on a second rate planet. We were planned for. But by whom, and why? It’s life’s biggest question.

And here an important distinction comes to bear. Is the stuff of creation an extension of God’s own being and so *All is One*, or is it different from God so that *All is Two*: God and then everything God made outside the divine life?³ *Pantheists* believe everything is part of God: the moon, the mosquitoes, all the complex processes of life, even you, which means the world is itself divine, including you, so don’t look up and out for spirituality to some transcendent source, rather, look within. *Creational Monotheists*, on the other hand, don’t confuse God and the world but make a clear distinction between the Creator and the Creation, “In the beginning, God made the heavens and the earth,”⁴ is the Bible’s first assertion. There is God in a category of one, and then there is everything God made that is not God, and that is creation in two parts: heaven and earth, visible and invisible. It’s good and even very good in some spots, but it’s not God, and to give it a centrality and loyalty that properly belong to God is what Christians and Jews and Muslims mean by *idolatry*; you give something in the world a weight and significance it just can’t bear by asking it to be what

² Howard Smith, “Humanity is Cosmically Special: Here’s How We Know,” *Washington Post*, 11/25/2016, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/humanity-is-cosmically-special-heres-how-we-know/2016/11/25/cd327520-b0cc-11e6-8616-52b15787add0_story.html?utm_term=.df9f94454519; also David Watson, “Theological Anthropology, FTW,” <https://davidfwatson.me/2016/12/07/theological-anthropology-ftw>,

³ See Peter Jones, *One or Two, Seeing a World of Difference* (Escondido, CA: Main Entry, 2010) on this most basic world view distinction.

⁴ Genesis 1:1.

it an never be. Christians, Jews, Muslims and philosophical theists all believe Reality is binary; it's two and only two. We believe Reality with a *Capital R* has a necessary being, God, and a contingent reality, Creation, that remains dependent. The two relate, but they are not the same. God is not the creation, and the creation is not God but something God made. And so we take another step down the decision tree.

Another decision, once the duality of God the Creator and the limited but good creation are on the map, is the question, What is their relationship? And if you are among the modern folk who vaguely believe in a Creator but would prefer this Being keep a polite distance like a good neighbor, then Deism is your deal.⁵ God runs heaven; we run the world below and prefer the landlord to stay upstairs, out of sight, out of mind. It's not atheism, which is no god to worry about, but it is practical atheism, a god on permanent vacation. The watchmaker wound it up, and now it runs quite well on its own. God as a distant observer only. This is deism. But if this lacks explanatory power— and I think it does— you opt for a more engaged deity, and that could be a God who lives at a distance and swoops in every now and then with a miracle to change the course of things, or a God who is always engaged with the whole creation and sometimes in surprising ways, which is to me a more satisfying picture.

A variant of this is the issue of divine revelation, whether there is such a thing or not. Are we just figuring God out from below, or is God about the business of providing hints and insights from above? Philosophy says the first, and Christianity, Judaism, and Islam welcome the insights of philosophy but add the conviction it's more of a two way exchange, not just us trying to figure God out from below but God actually showing himself though multiple channels from above in order to invite our willing cooperation in the working out of the deep purposes of history. We think our way through the evidences of what God has revealed in creation, in conscience, and— if you are a Jew or Christian— in the history and record of Scripture. We term this *divine revelation*, and it makes

⁵ On the origin of Deism and its ancient twin, Epicureanism, see Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York, NY: Norton & Co., 2011).

sense of a God who's in the communications business: a speaking God, a hearing God, an acting God, a guiding hand, a God who meddles, corrects, and who issues constant invitations to trust and obey in the messiness of life in a broken, frustrating, contrary world of unavoidable complexity. In other words, a messy God, a God with dirty hands, a God who might one day come among us to make his final case.

Now the outcome of my amateurish and artificial decision tree is to demonstrate that we all have a *world view*, a set of lenses through which we see the world and navigate our way through it, that our lenses are not single but involve a layering of experiences and decisions— many of them inherited and never really examined.⁶ For us, *it's just the way things are*. A world view gives answers to big questions like, What's real? Who's running things, if anyone? What can I count on? What's possible? What's the purpose of life? Where did it all come from? How can I become a good person? What happens when I die? Is there hope? Is there justice? Is there love?

Now I do all this to say that to understand the passage before us in the terms in which it was written requires a particular path down the decision tree with every fork and choice decisive. Luke the gospel author has a minority world view. Not no God and not many, but one God the Creator who is transcendent and other, yet not far from his handiwork, a God engaged in divine revelation and focused communication, in creation and conscience to all people, then to his special people the Jews, then within them to the Jesus people, and then through them to the larger world in order to draw the willing and responsive back into the circle of worship and cooperation. Not an impersonal force but an intensely tripersonal being— the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit— a God of covenant relationships, one who images himself in each of us and who builds within us a desire nothing on earth can satisfy, a hole in the heart only God can fill. And if you get at off at any of the exit ramps on the decision tree

⁶ See David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 267-74; also Michael W. Goheen, Craig G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008).

or take a wrong turn, the story before us makes no sense since it presumes one path down the chain of decisions. Others see an old religious fairey tale, a myth, a legend. But Luke wrote as he did because he looked out at God and life and Jewish and pagan history through a particular set of spectacles, what I call *a biblical world view*, a thick understanding of who God is and what God’s up to. If you go to one of those 3-D movies without the special goggles, everything is out of focus, but with the spectacles, it all comes clear and up close!

I can’t see the glasses you’re wearing this morning– atheist, polytheist, pantheist, deist, hedonist, pragmatist, Christian– or the number of filters you’ve accumulated along the way, but our goal today is to read Luke’s paragraph about John the Baptist’s conception and destiny on his terms, so at least we know the case he’s trying to make, whether we agree with it or not. So let’s begin.

“And it happened,” says Luke. It was an event with consequences, not a fairey tale in mythical time but datable, as he notes, “in the days of Herod (the great), king of Judea” by Roman permission from 37 to 4B.C. and a man about whom we know quite a lot. And then, from that elevated perch, Luke drops down quickly to a village in the Judean hills to an older couple of priestly heritage, Zechariah and Elizabeth; he a priest going to Jerusalem twice a year as part of cohort of Abijah for his temple duties, and she had Aaron, the first of the priestly line, as her ancestor. They are Jews to the bone, the very best ancient Judaism produced, a committed pious couple, and here is Luke’s footnote on their character, “And they both were righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.” That’s as good as it gets. You still meet these kind of people from time to time, those whose trust and loyalty has become so deeply part of who they are that they can’t imagine life otherwise. Their Bibles are worn, and they walk with God. It takes time to produce such, and often not a little pain, as we soon discover.

In a world where a woman was measured by children, and especially sons, they were childless. Then this verdict, “because Elizabeth was barren.” And to make it worse, “both were advanced in years.” Other women wondered– and sometimes gossiped– what Elizabeth had done wrong. What sin did she or he commit to give them such a fate? Childless, no male to continue the priestly

lineage, a branch with no fruit. What a cryin' shame. Good people, apparently, but such a sad life. They quit praying years ago when it was clear her days of fertility were past. In our day the validity of a marriage is not determined by whether or not there are children. Christian couples without natural or adopted children will often find ways to invest in the young in other ways. They're not second class, though that does not stop the questions and curious speculations of busy-bodies, and each church and family has its share of such.

What Rev. Zack and Mrs. Lizzy most wanted was denied them, and they took the pain and the shame and the hope and dreams and poured them out before the Lord in private prayer and in faithful temple service and local synagogue piety. And in the process, and in ways even they did not understand, were hollowed out and filled in a new way. They were now pregnant with possibilities because of faithful character. They were fertile with a receptivity beyond the normal cycle of reproduction. What they considered a failure was hidden preparation. They were not under a curse. They were about to be entrusted with a son who'd serve as Jesus' best man, the one who ushered him into his public ministry, and to boot he was Jesus' cousin.⁷ For those who walk with God, all is raw material, nothing wasted. Some things you can't change. So live with limits and keep leaning into God! Something is in the works, something only God can show you, and in the meantime, virtue is under way.

“It happened,” says Luke for a second time in verse 8, or as the King James puts it with more precision, “And it came to pass that...” Another datable event, this time in Jerusalem at the center of Jewish devotion, the temple.

Think of the Jewish priesthood as a kind of religious national guard. They were not on duty all the time but rotated in twice a year for a week of service. There were twenty-four cohorts of 700, and Zechariah's was the eighth, the division of Abijah. And while he was away from home for his hereditary duties, the lots were cast, and guess what? You were allowed the privilege only once. There was both a morning and afternoon sacrifice in the temple, a whole burnt offering for sin, and as part of their duties near the end of the ritual, the priest

⁷ 1:36.

with two assistants carried blazing coals from the altar in the courtyard into the temple proper and into the Holy Place just outside the innermost Holy of Holies that was just behind the curtain and into which only the High Priest went once a year on the Great Day of Atonement.⁸ This was not the morning but the afternoon or evening sacrifice, and it started at 3:00pm. Day by day God’s people were reminded of their sin and of how God’s deals with it at high cost; it was a kind of public health spiritual hygiene for the whole nation, and it was serious business.

Within the temple was the altar of incense, made of wood covered in gold, the place of enacted prayer, and it was now Zechariah’s sacred duty– after the two assistants departed– to place the incense on the coals and then prostrate himself face down on the floor as the cloud of fragrant smoke ascended upwards as an enacted prayer of the people.⁹ He’s now inside alone as an old man, but– as Luke notes– “the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.”¹⁰ Prayer is often the occasion for encounters and illuminations, and this is one of those times.

So the Lord has Zechariah right he wants him: right time, right place, the particulars of divine providence shaping events from behind the scenes. And such happens every day; most of God’s work is hidden behind coincidences, what I call *divine appointments*, and to me they come as I– like Zechariah– am prayerful and faithful in my duties. As I go about my work with a prayerful spirit and open heart, surprises happen, hidden things unfold. We should prepare and come to worship with an expectation of hearing from God and of the Holy Spirit encouraging us with fresh religious experience, and I find that on fast days I’m especially sensitive to such awareness.

Now the invisible part of creation we call *heaven*, is not far away, just

⁸ Exodus 30:1-10.

⁹ On the order of the ritual, see David Garland, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 65-66.

¹⁰ Psalm 41:2.

unseen, just beyond sight. So for an angel to appear does not involve travel but only an uncloaking, a showing. They're always near us for our aid,¹¹ and— when permitted— may appear. Zechariah was not asleep but fully awake, so we classify this as a *waking vision*, not a dream. Without warning, the other world opened up into his, “And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord— later identified as Gabriel— standing at *right side* of the altar of incense,” the location of divine favor, a symbol Zechariah and Luke’s hearers understood.¹²

Angels are mediators of the divine presence and messengers of the divine word; they step down the full voltage of God’s holy presence so we are totally overwhelmed. Think of them as transformers bringing the voltage down to household standards. They’re God’s loyal ambassadors, and should one unveil before you, the numinous presence will have total physical effects, namely awe and dread, intense fascination and acute fear, as with Zechariah. This is not Tinker Bell; this is not your friendly therapist. This is a telegram from God. And the initial command “Do not be afraid,” is because Zechariah was just short of a full blown panic attack. And then the words that changed everything, “Your prayer *is* heard in the present tense, and here is the outcome. Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall not name him after yourself, no Zack Jr. You shall call him *John*. You will help conceive him, but you do not get to name and claim him. He belongs to God from the start.”

So what has the Lord done with all your prayers? *Yes* to some, *No* to others, *Maybe* to some, *Later* to others. They’re not forgotten, and they are visited back upon us according to divine wisdom and divine love. But the goal is to keep the conversation going and to trust God with outcomes. Keep asking, keep seeking, keep praying, do not quit. The act of God here is not a virginal conception, as six month later with Mary,¹³ but divine restoration of a lost capacity, a healing of fertility towards the formation of a prophet, the one we

¹¹ Hebrews 1:14.

¹² Joseph Fitzmeyer, *Luke*, Volume 1 (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 325.

¹³ 1:26-38.

know as John the Baptist who lost his head to a pole dancer because he criticized the King’s sinful intimate arrangements.¹⁴

It is then, at the center of the passage, that Gabriel, in a three stanza, nine line oracle, announces– or maybe sings– about the mission John will have thirty years later. It’s a prophetic promise of a destiny, thus God has power to shape the present and the future to divine ends, all the while incorporating human freedom and choices; such is the flexibility and subtlety of God’s meticulous providence which does not need to rig everything in detail ahead of time. As events unfold along whatever route, God bends and shapes them to divine ends. It’s more a purpose than a plan, more an interactive dance than a blueprint.¹⁵ God has all the needed power and knowledge to work within the messiness of history to bring about divine ends through any number of routes and through all the possibilities. When you play chess with God, your moves are real moves which change the table and to which God responds, but God always wins because he always has more choices than you do. There are flanking maneuvers and inside moves outside your competence. And when you say Yes to Jesus Christ, you are drawn out of your limited set of choices into a much larger range of responses, no longer an opponent but a friend.

John’s birth will be a joy for his aged parents, and *many*– though not all, an ominous sign– will rejoice with them. Then in line three the first of three statements about his larger life, “And he will be great before the Lord.” Hidden in a village, son of an old priest and momma, shaped in their faith and in the stories of his people, immersed in Scripture, taken on pilgrimages to Jerusalem, every day a step towards the day he’s called onto the stage of history as the hinge between the Old and New Testaments. His life has limits and disciplines, no wine or whiskey; he will be inspired the Spirit and not by spirits. In fact, at the center of oracle, in line five of nine, is a promise that accompanies his conception, “... and he will be filled with the Spirit from his mother’s womb.”

¹⁴ Mark 6:14-29.

¹⁵ I have found Gregory Boyd’s *Is God To Blame?* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2003) helpful on these issues.

Luke 1:5-25..... 14

So don't tell me that pre-born children cannot relate to God all along their embryological pathway. Life begins at natural conception and ends at natural death, and the sooner we return to this medical and philosophical and legal reality, the healthier we will be as a people, and here the Roman Catholics are our best teachers. We Protestants have been much too friendly with the culture and its trends of devaluing children in favor of adult indoor sports, but the Catholics through their philosophers and ethicists have maintained a consistently pro-life ethic that is gaining new traction as young adults, the most aborted generation in history, begin to push back at the ballot box.¹⁶

A 1951 pamphlet titled "The Gift of Life" contains some traditional advice about human sexuality and the sanctity of life. For instance, the first page states, "The gift of life is shown to us with the birth of each new baby." Then, on pages 21 and 22, the author inform readers (presumably the average American teenager), "If one of the new male sperm meets and unites with an egg cell, a new life begins." The cover has a picture of a happy family—mom, dad, and three children—apparently leaving a church. It's all pretty standard stuff for a 50's-era booklet, until you notice the publisher, "Distributed by Planned Parenthood of America, 501 Madison Avenue, New York 22, N.Y."¹⁷

Biology did not change; what changed was the philosophy and the culture. Hugh Hefner won, and it was women and children who suffered from the idea of hook-ups without consequences. But if life begins at conception, and if each person is an image bearer, and if God has an active relationship with all—however small, so that John can be filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb, how does it change the way we see the culture and its cruelties? Yes, there is forgiveness to get out from under the condemnation of conscience, but the price on your side, whether male or female, is honesty, "This is what I did." As long as we fudge or minimize, we get to keep the guilt.

¹⁶ Kelsey Hazzard, "The Pro-Life Generation: Abortion Won't be Around Long if Young Americans Have a Say," LifeNews.com, 1/7/14, www.lifenews.com/2014/01/07.

¹⁷ PreachingToday.com search under Luke 1:5-25.

When I sit down with teens or adults, the conditions of whose conception was less than ideal— say fornication or rape or adultery or incest and the stigma and damage it always carries when they eventually find out, a keen sense of being downgraded as a person, what am I to say? To leave them with that idea is a curse, a thing not to be said because a life made in God’s image is on the line. So here’s what I say, and it came to me not from a book but in a face to face meeting with a young woman coming to terms with why she put such a low price tag on herself. Why did she treat herself like trash? “Jill,” I said— not her real name, “whatever the circumstances of your conception, however irregular, however unloving and painful, at the moment the sperm and egg came together, God said, “Welcome to my world. My grace is sufficient; you belong to me.” That is a promise God never retracts, even if the life is lost before birth by natural or by intrusive means. I don’t have that kind of on-demand wisdom, and from the look on her face, it was life-giving, almost unbelievable. When she left, I cried at the mercy of God.

I’m a pastor not a prophet, though the two are not always so easily distinguished. Martin Luther King was first a local pastor and only later a national prophet, and whatever his flaws, God used him as a new founding father to change the nation. Pastors serve local franchises; prophets rattle nations, and for John it would happen along three axes. “And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God.” When I speak, people say, “Nice sermon,” but when a prophet speaks, mass movements back toward God begin. The second axis is a restoration of families, beginning with fathers, “and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children,” in echo of the last promise of the Old Testament. Every fatherless child is missing something essential, and the longer we have policies that encourage it and pay for it, the more social problems we generate. And finally, he will “turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the just,” and this is the antidote to widespread foolishness. I’m amazed how many people did not get the basics of “how to live” loaded onto their hard disk. No one ever showed them, so from a deep reservoir I teach. “This is how you budget your time and money. This is how a man treats a woman. The things you do right today set you up for better decisions tomorrow. This is why reading and thinking are important. Do you know the power of a to-do list and goals?” Wisdom is imparted in mentoring, and our world is full of the ignorant

and the untaught and the undisciplined, and if revival is to change a culture, this kind of close work must be done. All this for the last line, “To make ready for the Lord (here meaning Jesus) a people prepared. All our work, as pastors or prophets, is preparatory and preliminary. Why? Because the most important appointment people have is not with us. It is *with the Lord*, now and at life’s end when the stakes are high and the outcomes permanent.

As a member of the Jewish clergy and a man of faith and character, as Luke earlier celebrated, Zechariah should have known better. But let’s be gentle. The encounter was overwhelming, and so his request for a sign, “*How shall I know this?*” is understandable. After all, he’s being asked to rethink the whole of his experience and to consider that the greatest work of his life, raising the last prophet the old regime, is still before him. And he’s old. And there stands Gabriel with a telegram. And how is he to tell Elizabeth? And will the High Priest think him crazy? So never be surprised at the unbelief of pastors and priests and prophets, especially when fresh experience comes our way.

The discipline the Lord imposed was silence.¹⁸ Time to think and pray, time to watch Lizzy’s abdomen swell and stretch. But when he walked out of the Holy Place and stood before the crowds, he could not announce the blessing. Perhaps he made a gesture, and from the look on his face they guessed he’d seen a vision. They were a culture that understood such things; visions and dreams, prophetic revelations and judgments were part of living with their God. And when his tour was over, Zack went home, and it happened. He and Elizabeth conceived, and so disorienting and amazing was the experience of their wrinkled bodies being involved in God’s fruitful purposes that she hid herself for five months and pondered, “Thus the Lord has done to me in the days when he looked upon me, to take away my reproach from among men.” She was not under a curse, but in the center of God’s purpose, and she knew it not until the lot fell to Zechariah one day and a new world opened up. There’s nothing more determinative for your life than your world view, the lenses through which you see and make sense of all that comes your way. What if it’s time for some new lenses. What if Luke sees more than we do?

¹⁸ John’s birth is recounted in 1:57-80 where the silence is lifted.
