



Luke 1:57-80

“The Other Birth Story” (6th in a series on Luke’s Gospel)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

LUKE 1:57-80 "THE OTHER BIRTH STORY"

Age Of Salvation Has Begun, Prophecy Fulfilled + New Prophecy

A. vv. 57-66 JOHN'S BIRTH, THREE SIGNS FULFILLED, MINOR DATING.

What Gabriel Promised (1:5-25) Is Trustworthy, Prophecy Fulfilled

1) vv.57-58 Sign Of Birth Fulfilled/ Neighbors Rejoice, 1:13-14.

3 Responses

- 57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to be delivered, **vv.57-60 Elizabeth As Character In Her Own Right**
a and she gave birth to a son. **Months: vv.24, 26, 36, 56**
58 b And her neighbors and kinsfolk heard that the Lord had showed (magnified) great mercy to her, **Mercy 1:46, 50, 54, 72**
c and they rejoiced with her. **Life In Village Community: Rejoiced, Offended, Holy Fear**

2) vv.59-63 Sign Of Naming Fulfilled, Elizabeth Again Speaks, 1:13.

- 59 a And on the eighth day they came to circumcise **THE CHILD**; **1:6, 2:22-23, Gen. 17:9-14, Lev. 12:3, Observant**
and they would have named him Zechariah after his father, **Pressure, "were already calling him Zechariah"**
60 but his mother said, "Not so; he shall be called John." **God Names/Claims This Child**
Convention Must Give Way To New Reality
61 b And they said to her, "None of your kindred is called by this name."/
62 And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he would have him called. **Community/Family Pressure**
Deaf, 1:20-23, Deference
63 a' And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, "John is his name." **Agrees With Wife, Stresses Obedience**
And they all marveled (felt fear). **2:9, 5:10, Joy To Amazement, Response To God's Action In Luke/Acts**

1') vv.64-66 Sign Of Dumbness Fulfilled, Neighbors Fear/Speak/Question: 1:19-20.

- 64 And *immediately* his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. **2nd Chance! Healing**
65 a And fear came on all their neighbors. **God's Mercy Liberates People To Worship Fearlessly!**
b And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea; **2:17-18, 38; 4:37**
66 c and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "*What* then will **THIS CHILD** be?" **Answered In vv.67-79**
For the hand of the *Lord* was with him. **//1:15, 16, 17 Lord Ends Each Stanza, Active In History, Acts 11:21**
Elizabeth Prophesies 1:39-56), Focus On Jesus, Not John!)

B. vv. 67-79 ZECHARIAH'S PROPHECY OF JOHN'S FUTURE (Latin: BENEDICTUS).

1:14-17, Programmatic Psalm = God's Perspective

1) vv.67-68 Visited And Redeemed (Reflection On Events), Picks Up v.64. **Mercy Liberates!**

- 67 And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying, **Biblical Song/Canticle**
68 "'*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel*', **Ps. 41:13-14, 72:18, 106:48, Jewish Berakah: Initial Praise + Reasons**
because he has VISITED **Visited = Term For Historical Intervention, God Shows Up! Gen. 21:1, 50:4**
and redeemed his people, **Redeem = Freed From Slavery, Corporate Focus: People, Us, We, Our**
Prophetic Past Tense As If Already Accomplished

2) vv.69-71: 4 Key Terms: Salvation, His Child, Prophets, Enemies/Hands.

- 69 *and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his child David,* **Ps. 89:17-24, /Jesus**
70 *even as he spoke through the mouths of his holy prophets from of old,* **Looks Back/Forward**
71 *that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hands of those who hate us;* **Ps. 106:10//Ex.**
Acts 13:10 Satan As Enemy

3) vv.72-73 Mercy And Covenant Faithfulness By God.

- 72 *to perform the mercy promised to our fathers,* **6:36**
and to remember his holy covenant,
73 *the oath which he swore to our father Abraham.* **Circumcision Above, Gen. 22:17**
Includes Direct Address To John, 1:76

2') vv.74-77 Four Key Terms: Hand/Enemies, O Child, Prophet, Salvation.

- 74 *to grant that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear,* **Goal**
75 *in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our lives.* **Character, Ex. 7:16, Josh. 24:14**
76 *But you, O child, will be the prophet of the Most High;* **7:26, Future, John Subordinated, 1:15-17**
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, **Jesus //1:15-17, Mal. 3:1, Is. 40:3**
77 *to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.* **3:1-6, 4:18, 5:20-21, Key!**
True Evangelist, Not Rallying Troops!

1') vv.78-79 Visited And Redeemed (Images Of Light, Life, And Peace). **Text? Is.60:1**

- 78 *Through the tender mercy of our God by which there will VISIT us/* **'a rising light from on high,'**
79 *to give light/* **'to those in darkness and in the shadow of death',** **Acts 26:18, Ps. 106:10, 14 (LXX)**
to guide/ **'our feet into the way of peace.'** **New Life, Peaceful Path, Not Armed Revolt As 66-70AD, Is. 59:8**

A' v.80 JOHN'S GROWTH, SIGN OF FUTURE WILDERNESS MINISTRY, MINOR DATING.

- 80 1 And **THE CHILD** grew and became strong in spirit, **1 Sam. 2:21, 26, Physical/Spiritual/ Intellectual + Departure**
2 and he was in the wilderness until the day of his manifestation of Israel. **3:2, Is. 40:3, Solitude/Ascetic, Divine Timing**

LUKE 1:1-4:15

"THE PRE-PUBLIC AND EARLY CAREERS OF JOHN AND JESUS IN PARALLEL"

I. 1:1-4 RHETORICAL PREFACE OF AN ANCIENT BIOS: LAYERS OF TRADITION.

II. THE PARALLEL STORIES OF CONCEPTION, BIRTH, EARLY SERVICE.

A. 1:5-25 Annunciation To Zechariah

1. vv.5-7 Time, Characters, Lineage, Status

2. vv.8-23 Annunciation By Gabriel

a. vv.8-10 Zechariah's Service/ People Outside

b. vv.11-20 Appearance, Message, Sign

1. v.11 Angel appears

2. v.12 Fearful response

3. v.14 Angelic message (4 phrases)

4. vv.14-17 Gabriel's song proclaims

John's significance

5. v.18 Zechariah's objection

6. v.19 Angel's response/authority

v.20 "And behold," sign of dumbness

7. v.23 Departure

a' vv.21-23 People outside/ Zechariah's service

A' 1:26-38 Annunciation To Mary

1. vv.26-27 Time, Characters, Lineage, Status

2. vv.28-37 Annunciation By Gabriel

a. (No Parallel)

b. vv.28-37 Appearance, Message, Sign

1. v.28 Angel appears

2. v.29 Fearful response

3. vv.30-31 Angelic message (4 phrases)

4. vv.32-33 Gabriel's song proclaims

Jesus' significance

5. v.34 Mary's objection

6. v.35 Angel's response/ Spirit's authority

vv.36-37, "And behold," sign of Elizabeth

7. v.38 Departure

a' v.38 Promise fulfilled, Mary's response

B. 1:39-56 Visitation Of Mary & Elizabeth.

1. vv.39-40 Mary's Arrival And Greeting

2. vv.41-45 John's Response, Elizabeth's Song To Mary

2' vv.46-55 Mary's Song To God In Two Stanzas

1' v.56 Mary's Stay And Departure

C. 1:57-80 Birth And Destiny Of John

John As Prophet (1:16-17, 1:76, 3:1-6)

1. (cf. 1:5 Herod)

John at home

2. v.57 Birth of John

3. v.58 Neighbors, Kinfolk Rejoice

4. vv.59-66 Circumcision, Naming of John

5. vv.67-79 Priestly prophecy concerning John at his presentation

6. v.80a Growth of John

v.80b John in the wilderness

D. 3:1-22 Beginning Of John's Ministry

1. 3:2b John as "Son of Zechariah"

2. 3:2b John in the "wilderness"

3. 3:8 Abraham reference

3. 3:7-18 Preaches Is. "good news"

4. 3:19-20 John rejected by Herod unacceptable prophet

C' 2:1-52 Birth And Destiny Of Jesus

Jesus As Messiah/Son (1:21-33, 1:69; 1:35, 2:49)

1. vv.1-5 Historical Dating: *Caesar, Quirinius*

Holy family to Bethlehem

2. vv.6-7 Birth of Jesus

3. vv.8-20 Angels appear to shepherds who go and rejoice with Mary

4. v.21 Circumcision, Naming of Jesus

5. vv.22-39 Priestly Prophecy Concerning Jesus at his presentation

6. v.40 Growth of Jesus

vv.41-51 Jesus in the temple

v.52 Growth of Jesus

D' 3:23-4:15 Beginning Of Jesus' Ministry

1. 3:23-38 Jesus as "son of Joseph," "son of God"

2. 4:1-15 Jesus in the "wilderness," "if you are Son"

3. 3:34 Abraham reference

3. 4:16-30 Preaches Is., "good news," "Joseph's son"

4. 4:28-29 Jesus rejected by Nazareth unacceptable prophet

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 1:57-80

Roman Catholic and Protestant lectionaries preserve Zechariah's prophecy (1:67-79) as an Advent lesson, but in separating it from the larger thought unit by omitting 1:57-66, 80, the hymn is excised from its setting. The liturgical uses of canticles (biblical songs) has contributed to this practice. That 1:57-80 is a thought unit is indicated by its A-B-A' pattern with the word *child* (vv.59, 66) // *child* (v.80) serving as a bracket. That it stands in parallel to the panel on Jesus' birth (2:1-52), both of which end with growth reports, is another indicator. While Zechariah's speech has its own integrity, it may be easily extracted from its context, as indicated by the fact that one may read from v.66 to v.80 without a break. Luke has wrapped the central section (B. vv.67-79) in a frame touching the birth and circumcision (A. vv.57-66), childhood and wilderness interim of John (A' v.80). The surface structure of Zechariah's prophecy is a 5:1 concentric pattern with vv.72-73 at the core (1-2-**3**-2'-1'). The words *visited* (1. v.68) // *visit* (1' v.78) are the inclusion for the prophecy. The next inside layer (2. vv.69-71 // 2' vv.74-77) contains multiple common terms: *salvation, child, prophet(s), saved/delivered, enemies, hands*. The center (3. vv.72-73) is dense with covenant language (*mercy promised, remember his holy covenant, oath*) with a reference to *our fathers* (v.72a) // *our father Abraham* (v.73) bracketing the core statement *and to remember his holy covenant* (v.72b). Thus, 1:57-80 shows careful design and is to be read as a whole. In addition to the concentric surface structure, another pattern is noted: 1) vv.67-75 are addressed to God in past tenses, 2) vv.76-79 to John in future tenses. John's birth has phenomena and portents, and Jesus' are even greater!

Reading the story of John's birth requires cross-reference to his annunciation (1:5-25) since the two are correlated as prophecy and fulfillment- a Lukan favorite. What is promised in 1:13-14, a son at whose birth neighbors rejoice, is fulfilled in vv.57-58. That he is to be named John, as the angel announced, is fulfilled in vv.59-63. The end of Zechariah's censure is promised in 1:19-20, fulfilled in 1:64-66. Gabriel is a truth-teller. A range of responses are noted in A. vv.57-66. First the neighbors rejoice; they then resist the angelic command, "None of your kindred is called by this name." They marvel in fear when silent Zechariah supports his wife; they experience fresh fear as Zechariah's tongue is loosed and he bursts into praise. The neighbors function is completed as they start a widening chain of testimony that leads to serious reflection (v.66 *laid them up in their hearts*) and a common question, "What then will this child be?" Zechariah answers the question in vv.67-79. Zechariah and Elizabeth receive John as a gift and obey God together, despite village pressure. Patience and courage plus obedience inherit the promises!

John's praise to God (vv.67-75) and address to John (76-79) are a summary of Lukan theology. The occasion is John's birth, but the focus is Jesus from the house of David. He is the mighty *horn of salvation*, one foretold, one who finally enacts freedom from the old foes of sin, Satan, and death (v.71 *our enemies... who hate us*) in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham. Jewish political hopes are recast in a larger agenda. The vision of the new life Jesus brings is worship without fear lived in personal dedication to God (*holiness*) coupled with right relationships (*righteousness*). The address shifts abruptly to John in v.76 is because he alone prepares the way as a herald of repentance (i.e. heart change) plus a new relationship to God marked by the forgiveness and removal of the blockages of sin. God is enabling a fresh relationship with himself. What John anticipates, Jesus enacts. It is not often noticed that the three lines of vv.78-79 each end with a Scripture citation: *visit... a rising light from on high* (Is. 60:1), *give light... to those in darkness and the shadow of death* (Ps. 106:10, 14), *to guide... our feet into the way of peace* (Is. 59:8). This parallels the quotation of Ps. 72:18 in v.68, *Blessed be the Lord.... A visit from Jesus, the one from on high, changes everything. The final note is that John progresses through physical and spiritual development until called by God to a time of isolation and training in desert silence. A pious home unfolds into personal encounter and a prophetic consciousness. God is preparing a voice! Listen up!*

THE OTHER BIRTH STORY

“And the child grew and became strong in spirit...”

Physical and spiritual growth are intended to progress together.

L U K E 1 : 8 0

Long ago a man came to his rabbi, "Since my marriage of ten years has produced no children," he said, "I ask you grant me a letter of divorce." The wise rabbi- knowing his friend to be an impulsive man- urged him to go make a sort of feast of the event. "I see no reason," the Rabbi said, "why a divorce should not be celebrated in some way, similar to marriage."

Willing to do almost anything to stay in the rabbi's good graces, he went home and gave a banquet. As he ate and drank his spirits soared. "Wife," he said, "I am prepared to let you take the most valuable thing in the house as a sign of my good faith. I wish you long years and happiness."

After the guests left, the man- tired from drinking and celebrating- fell into a deep sleep. The woman quickly ordered servants to carry him to her father's house. The next morning, finding himself in a strange house, he demanded an explanation.

"I am acting on your word," she said softly. "You offered me the most precious thing in the house. You are of far more value than any item of furniture."

The man was deeply touched by his wife's affection. The next day he again approached his rabbi, "My wife and I ask your prayers on our behalf, so that the Lord will grant us heirs." The rabbi assured the man he had already begun to pray for the two of them. Nine months later she gave birth to their first child.¹

That is a biblical story, not a story from the Bible in the strict sense, but a story built of scriptural imagery and themes:

- * the problem of childlessness,
- * the role of prayer,
- * the intervention of a messenger of God (angel or rabbi!),

¹ William White, *Stories For The Journey* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 38-39.

- * a reversal of circumstances,
- * the birth of a child understood as a divine gift,
- * and a lesson about marriage.

All these themes find their antecedents in the stories of Abraham and Sarah who in their senior years had little Isaac² and of Elkanah and Hannah who had little Samuel.³ Others who suffered barrenness then conceived with the Lord's help include Rebecca,⁴ Rachel,⁵ and the mother of Samson.⁶ Mary and Joseph are the final couple whose story exceeds and yet catches up and completes all the other *irregular* pregnancy stories in which the Bible takes such delight. The Scripture treats fertility as a gift of God and shows God both withholding and then granting the power at key moments in the unfolding story of Israel as a kind of gate. We have seen that Luke opens his Gospel with two such stories, first Elizabeth and Zechariah-the aged and pious parents of John the Baptist who conceive through restored capacity, then Joseph and Mary who welcome God the Son into their marriage by a direct act of God's creative Spirit. Apparently it's one of God's favorite ways of bending history towards the goal one course correction at a time. Send a special kid, then wait till they grow up and find their destiny in your purposes. How many of these never made it to birth here in America. How many prophetic voices have been silenced? Is this one reason we can't find our way? We know John's destiny because of the story of his conception and the prophecies that attended his birth. But what if God has a destiny for every child, however conceived, and what if the job of parents- whether regular or irregular- is to plant that idea so deep nothing can erase it?

“One of your eardrums looks irregular,” the doctor said to me last week.
“Lot of ear infections as an infant,” I replied.

Betty and Jim- my parents- moved to Cheraw in June of 1953 to open a practice. Till just before I was born a month later my mother was a charge nurse at McLeod's and dad a resident. They knew all the staff, which is why a year and half

² Gen. 16:1.

³ I Sam. 10:2.

⁴ Gen. 25:21

⁵ Gen. 30:1.

⁶ Judges 13:2.

later my tonsils and adenoids were removed at McLeod’s. I was one sick little boy. Nothing to it, they were told, standard procedure.

The night before the operation my mother awoke frightened, disturbed by a dream. In the recovery room a suture popped, spurting blood like a fountain, and there was no suction machine in the recovery room.

“It’s just a dream, Betty. Sutures don’t pop anymore. Technique’s better, and Bobbette’s a great ENT. Phil will be just fine. I’ll be in the operating room.”

But she would not listen and would not leave me alone. She stayed beside my little bed in recovery, and guess what? As in the dream, a suture popped, blood everywhere, and no suction machine- which should have been standard equipment. Had she not been there, I don’t know if I’d be here today. Just this last week a doctor told me of a child who recently died in a regional hospital of the same complications, so the danger was real, and mine was fifty-seven years ago.

I remember the first time my mother told me the story, and when I feel weak and discouraged and a failure and want God to find some other chump to tend his unruly flock, I ask her tell me again. All my life I’ve had this sense of destiny, of a purpose I could not quite reach, not something as big as John the Baptist, but still a sense of call, of some great debt I had to pay. *I was saved for something*, I remind myself, and then I quit the whining and go back to work, not as a prophet to the nation but as a pastor to the church and community I serve. And blessed is the child who somewhere along the way has a deep sense of duty or calling planted in the rich soils of imagination. It did not hurt for the last four years to be in Hartsville and to weekly walk into the entrance of McLeod’s and think to myself, “I almost died here. Thank you, Lord, for Betty’s crazy dream.” John Wesley was saved from a fire, and me from bleeding to death. I was saved to serve; that is how I read the story.

This time of year there will be many readings of *The Christmas Story*, meaning the story of Jesus' birth from Luke chapter 2. What is neglected is *The Other Birth Story*, which comes just before the Christmas story with insights all its own into the ways of God and all that was necessary to arrange for the arrival of Jesus. Someone had to prepare the way, alert the people, sound the alarm, blow the trumpet, sink a sharp plow into the hard ground, remind the people that only a deep change of heart could receive the gift of forgiveness, and that someone was John, who from conception was marked out for a decisive role as the spokesman of God. He cleared the path on which Jesus walked. The archangel Gabriel prophesied his conception

and future greatness before the Lord,⁷ and his father Zechariah’s first words after his deafness and dumbness were removed was to echo in his own blessing what Gabriel had said about the boy nine months before.⁸

Whatever God does requires preparation. God’s visits need a prepared people, and it may be that we are in such a season now. What does God want to do through the grand old lady called Main Street UMC? What if we set our hearts to respond to the preparation so as not to miss the visitation? Not just church stuff as usual but a palpable sense of divine mercy setting lives in order through the power of love and the personal work of the Holy Spirit? What if we turned to God with a humble heart and empty hands? What if we obeyed God in the details? I need such a visitation. What happened to me four decades ago at conversion is running pretty thin?

I know many in our day are having fewer children, and that those few, precious little ones are receiving over-much attention. Camps, dance lessons, sports, tutoring, being told constantly how smart they are and what a great future they have: college, career, success and the rest of the dream. Little princes and princesses every one! But I wonder if in all this child-centeredness we are missing something, and that is the destiny a child can have in God. It’s one reason we baptize the little heathens! Claim them for Christ early on as their parents symbolically hand them over for a few moments. But what would it mean to plant a seed in the heart of a child that there is already a call on their life, a call from God, some risky venture to which they are summoned which goes beyond the American dream of the good life? For a mother or father to look them in the eye and say, “All we do is so one day you can hear and obey the One to whom you must finally answer, and as much as we love you, it’s not us!” What if that was the explicit message, not just the weaker messages of *Do your best* and *Make us proud*?

As I look around at families I seem to see more and more young adults who are not launching, not getting traction in their lives, who cannot seem to break out of the gravitational pull of their parents circle of influence and their own lack of purpose and vision. I know the economy is down and jobs hard to find, but something else is at work here. If a child is told by parents that family and success are all there is, and if parents never point to God as the source in their own lives, why should it

⁷ 1:14-17.

⁸ 1:67-79.

surprise us that the kids rarely consider the call of God and have trouble finding a trajectory. Do not wrap them in such a cocoon of comfort and family obligations that they are more interested in pleasing you than in obeying God. Listen to old Zechariah the priest of Israel as he stands over the eight-day-old John:

“But you, O child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.”

Now I don’t know for sure, but I suspect those same words were spoken over John many times. John grew up in a pious Jewish home, waiting and wondering when the word would come, the word he’d so long heard about. Only God can issue a call, but parents do much to help either prepare the way or block the way. Zack and Lizzy prepared the way for John; John prepared the way for Jesus, and Jesus prepares the way for us all to come home to God, now in this world and in the age to come.

Is there someone in your home who needs to be prepared? What are you doing about it? It is time in the church to begin to push the weight of training away from the church and back to the parents. You should not ask the Sunday School teacher or youth worker to do what you are not doing at home. Shopping around for the best children’s or youth program is a symptom of the disease, not a cure. It’s the best evidence I know parents have already abandoned their responsibilities under God. You cannot delegate the spiritual and moral formation of your child to others. You must walk with Christ and nourish an infectious faith your child will catch. Anything we do at the church is supplementary. It is your responsibility, and for too long pastors and staff have sent the wrong message, “Let us do it for you. We have a super program.” We can’t change in an hour or two what you’re not doing in the other 166. It’s insane! With the best of intentions we have undermined the God-given duties of parents, as our baptismal vows make clear when they ask:

“Will *you* nurture your child in Christ’s holy church (the community part), that by *your teaching and example* (the parental part) they may be guided to accept God’s grace for themselves, to profess their faith openly, and to lead a Christian life?” **I will.**⁹

Youth and children’s ministries are over-pressurized with expectations in our day

⁹ *U.M. Hymnal*, 34.

because parents are not practicing the faith at home. Teaching families how to teach the faith under their own roof is perhaps the most radical thing a church could do.

A parent who is not walking with Christ should not be surprised when their children are swallowed by the worst in the culture. And, frankly, when I look back on my own years as a dad, there was much missing and much I regret- most of which Lori did her best to make up for.¹⁰ If we are to survive the massive shifts in our culture, then each home much again become a center of spiritual and intellectual formation in the faith, which means parents have to do it first! Family Bible reading, times to cut off all media and converse about important matters, family missions involvement, lots of good books, children hearing dad and mom pray for them aloud and by name, placing hands on their children’s heads each night and blessing them with a destiny in God.¹¹ These are the practices that are the grounding for children to hear the call of God and move into their destiny. Lives and schedules will have to be rearranged. How about one night a week devoted to this stuff? Is that too much?

“Tell me again, Father, what did Gabriel say before I was born?”
“But you, O child, will be the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.”

What did it mean for little John to look into the face of his aged priestly father and hear over and over those words? What destiny are you speaking in the minds and hearts of the little ones God has given you, and this is not just for parents but for grandparents, and remember: It’s never too late to start!

It’s amazing just how much of life is preparatory. Nine months of darkness, floating in your mother’s inner ocean, getting ready to enter life. Then years of training to learn the elementary basics of decent human functioning: hygiene, manners, self-discipline with impulses, please and thank you, working and playing well with others. You learn to play an instrument or become skilled at a sport through

¹⁰ For a sobering read on emotionally healthy pastors and church systems, see Peter Scazzerro, *The Emotionally Healthy Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003). Few books disturb me as much as this one.

¹¹ For a proposal, see Mark Holmen, *Church + Home* (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light), also his website at www.faithbeginsathome.com.

the long preparation we call *practice*, with simple skills leading to more complex ones. Before a Methodist preacher is ordained an elder there are seven years of college and seminary plus a two year internship, even more for physicians, and for both a lifetime of continuing education. And it's all preparatory! All about getting ready to actually get to the proper work of your vocation. Same with John.

Every day of John's life was preparatory, every day grist for the mill of his relationship with God, molding him for the day he would usher Jesus out of seclusion and onto the stage of public ministry. And then, when his work was done, John died as a martyr by being separated from his head for criticizing the king's sexual immorality. Which leads me to ask: what kind of preparation are you in at the moment? What's going on in your life that if you entered it fully with an eye to God would prepare you to be a dangerous and disturbing agent of the divine purpose?

TURNING TO THE TEXT

A. John's Birth And The Fulfillment Of Prophecy (vv.57-66).

In that world, despite folk customs, there was no way to determine the sex of a child before birth, but nine months prior Gabriel had announced to Zechariah, "your wife Elizabeth will bear you *a son*."¹² This promise is fulfilled in verse 57, "Now the time came for Elizabeth to be delivered, *and she gave birth to a son*." Gabriel had also said, "and many will rejoice at his birth,"¹³ thus verse 58, "And her neighbors and kinsfolk heard that the Lord had showed mercy to her, *and they rejoiced with her*."

Luke believes- with the rest of Scripture- that the Living God has sufficient power and wisdom to bring about divine ends, not in spite of, but through the messy uncertainties of history. In, around, and through the complexities of human freedom God is at work bending events to divine ends. You can trust this God; nothing is outside God's supervision. Yielding your life to this God is to- even now- be rightly aligned with the deepest grain of the universe, and that is where you want to live.

The piety of Elizabeth and Zechariah is shown in their keeping the traditions of Israel in John's circumcision on the prescribed eighth day. Since that was also the

¹² 1:13.

¹³ 1:14.

naming, people who gathered assumed the child would be named Zechariah. How it surprised them when Elizabeth corrected them, “Not so; he shall be called John.” Considerable social pressure was brought to bear on Elizabeth since she had been so assertive, “None of your kindred is called by this name.” And when her husband took the slate and backed his wife by writing, “John is his name,” everyone was bewildered. All this to fulfill a word of Gabriel, “and you shall call his name John.”¹⁴

Our God delights to use free human obedience to fulfill his promises. Zachariah and Elizabeth stood together against the social pressure to conform because of gratitude to the God who heard their prayers. And you can bet the old priest was wondering when the next promise would be fulfilled, the one about him getting his hearing and voice back! Gabriel had promised nine months before, “And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak *until the day that these things come to pass*, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.”¹⁵ Well, this is the day, and now’s the time! Verse 64, “And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.” God keeps his promises! God is fully able to bring about divine ends in the messy uncertainties of history. Zechariah experiences the mercy of God before he prophesies it to others. He obeys in hope and is immediately restored. *Trust and obey*, the hymn says, *Trust and obey*.

The long, listening silence had hollowed out in Zechariah a reservoir of pent-up praise that burst forth in a Spirit-filled prophecy there in the village. Look at all that had been fulfilled in short order: it was a boy; the neighbors rejoiced; the right name was given; Zechariah’s judgment was lifted, and there came forth from this old priest an eloquent composition that announced what God was about to do through his boy and the even-greater-one who would follow him six months later.

Everyone came that day for the predictable ritual of another circumcision and naming. But here the order of service gave way to a divine visitation. God showed up at church in a sacramental act! Twice we are told observers were filled with fear and at the end raised the question, “What then will this child be?” Not that every other child in the village was not valuable, but there are times when God shapes the life of a child to later change the world. I think of Martin Luther King, a prophet from a Baptist home who changed the nation when he came out of the wilderness of

¹⁴ 1:13

¹⁵ 1:20.

segregation to shake the world with his words. So it was with John, of which Luke says in verse 66, “For the hand of the Lord was with him.” With him at conception. With him during gestation. With him at birth and circumcision. With him as an infant, a child and a young man, verse 80: “And the child grew and became strong.” With him in the desert years, with him in his preaching, with him when Jesus showed up in the baptismal line, with him in prison, and finally with him in death.

Divine involvement does not short-circuit developmental regularities but works through them. There is simply no better place for a child to pass through the ages-and-stages than in a faithful home where the traditions of faith are kept and where parents are open to interaction with the Living God. Never underestimate the impact on a child of being shaped in a home where parents have a testimony to give, “Daughter, let me tell you about the Lord and what he’s done in my life.” Such conversations are never forgotten. The most powerful thing a parent can do for a child is to keep their own relationship with God up to date. Don’t expect them to believe or practice what you do not; don’t expect them to rise above the level of your own character and habits. Such is the call and burden of being a believing parent, and remember, perhaps the reason God commands children to honor father and mother is because too often their lives are not honorable. Sit with me and hear a young man say, “My parents were hippie dope-heads.” And I say back, “If all you can honor them for is DNA, then start there, that you are today alive to follow Christ.”

B. Zechariah’s Praise And Prophecy (vv.66-79).

It would have been logical to place the content of John’s prophecy at the end of verse 64, “And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.” But because of its length, Luke places it as a separate paragraph.

There are times when nothing works like a familiar hymn. It stirs the feelings and lifts the mind to God. One of the great gifts of God is musicians who compose tunes and poets who write lyrics to put our faith in song. We sing the truths in order to get them deep in our bones. Our current *United Methodist Hymnal* is a compilation of the best of two thousand years of such singing. So when we sing songs from centuries other than our own, we are celebrating the communion of the saints in song. We become contemporaries with John Newton the slave-trader who wrote *Amazing Grace*, with our own troubadour Charles Wesley whose *Christ the Lord Has Risen Today* is sung round the world; we sing *Were You There When They Crucified The Lord* with slaves. We sing the praise of God by recounting what God has done, just

as Zechariah did at John's circumcision, when there was cut in his flesh a reminder that life is from God and that Jews are chosen.

There came out of Zechariah under the Spirit's influence a hymn of praise. It was divine inspiration at its best. Nine months of silent waiting, nine months of watching Elizabeth's abdomen swell. And when it all came true in a day more than a week, Zechariah was cut loose by the Spirit and sang a solo.

We don't have the tune, but the shape of the lyrics make it clear that what we have here is not just a spontaneous but a studied composition which means that to be filled with the Spirit and attention to literary excellence are not at odds with one another. A lifetime of reflection on Scripture by the old priest is brought to focus in a hymn which begins with a psalm fragment, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel." And why is this God to be praised? "... because he has visited and redeemed his people." This is a God who shows up and does stuff, as just happened!

The thing to note here is that Zechariah is not speaking about John but about Jesus who is still in the womb, yet to see the light of day. John will be a prophet without parallel, but only in Jesus can God be said to personally *visit his people*. It is he who is the Davidic Messiah the prophets pointed to. He is the one who fulfills the ancient promises to Abraham. It is only after speaking of the one-to-come that Zechariah announces destiny to the eight-day-old child in verse 76, "But you, O child, will be the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people *in the forgiveness of their sins*."

What Christ brings and what John forecasts is the offer of a restored relationship with God. We are offered freedom from the burden of accumulated sins, deliverance from our spiritual enemies and all their effects, light in darkness and a path towards peace. For all its failures, the church across the ages is the custodian of this message, that in Christ we are invited back into a restored relationship with God, one to be enjoyed starting now. That is what we do and why we exist: to invite people back into this richly interactive relationship with the Trine God in order to be agents of the kingdom in this world and to have a place in the world to come.

Luke ends in verse 80 with two complimentary ideas. First, John's multi-level development, "and the child grew and became strong in spirit." John hit puberty, got peach fuzz on his chin, and started noticing females, but - like Jesus- remained single

and celibate.¹⁶ Two virginal men shook Israel and changed the world. Then the notice that John left home to be alone with God, “and he was in the wilderness until the day of his manifestation of Israel.” One day he walked away, and- so far as we knew- never came back. Zack and Lizzy were likely dead by this time.

John grew, and then- when the prophesies about him were confirmed in his own call- left for the Judean wilds, there to listen for the voice and learn what no earthly father or wise rabbi could teach. From the constant interactions of village life to the desert to be alone in solitude. Out of the richness of family faith and out of his own friendship with the silence came a word that lit up the nation and prepared the way. So if you are not hearing God these days, I suggest silence and solitude. Carve them out and set up a listening post. Let the noise in your head and heart quiet till you can hear the whisper again.¹⁷ And when John emerged after who-knows-how-long, he wore the uniform of a prophet and ate a simple, kosher, desert diet. Word got out, and people came down to the Jordan to hear his preaching and be washed in order to be prepared to meet their Maker.¹⁸ Biblical preaching is a good thing, but Biblical prophecy is a better thing because of its immediate, piercing effects. Preaching is second order; prophecy first order. “Nice sermon, pastor.” I don’t think anyone ever said that to John. Instead, they wept or else cursed him and left.

CONCLUSION

God is not absent but active in our world. No somewhere far off but right here in Greenwood, under our noses. Children are in the womb now who will one day carry out the purposes of God. The purpose of reading the Bible in worship and hearing it unfolded and explored in sermons is to alert us to some of the ways God operates, sometimes in prophesies and miracles and startling public signs, but more often in the unspectacular rhythms of family life. Most of John’s life was ordinary. But then....

¹⁶ Admittedly an argument from silence, but consistent with the facts.

¹⁷ See Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1998), Chapter 7, “Solitude,” 96-109.

¹⁸ For a review of John’s significance, see Ben Witherington, *New Testament History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), Chapter 4, “The Herodians and Their Prophetic Adversaries: John and Jesus,” 80-106.

STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1:56-66

1. Take time to go back and read the three predictions that are fulfilled in vv.57-66. Why does this matter to Luke's unfolding picture of God's faithfulness?
2. How is Elizabeth a model of faithful assertiveness in vv.59-63?
3. Where do you feel family, cultural, or friend pressure not to obey God in the details?
4. How is word of mouth still the most effective way to spread news of God's work?
5. Underline each of the emotionally charged words in these verses. What do you learn?

1:67-79

6. What do you make of the fact that Zechariah's inspired psalm is so artfully composed?
7. Has God ever *visited* a church of which you were a part? What happened?
8. How many different ways does Luke describe *salvation* in these verses?
9. Why does Zechariah praise Jesus before he speaks to his own son in v.76ff.?

1:80

10. Might there be a significant time gap between the first and second halves of this verse?
11. Why was it important that John come from a pious home? That he be isolated with God.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION AND PARDON

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.** Let us pray:

Holy and Almighty God, our Heavenly Father,

to obey you is to know you,

and to know you is to love you,

and to love you for all your great gifts is our only fulfillment.

But rather than obey you, we have sought to appease you with our gifts.

Rather than know you, we become busy with religious projects.

in the place of loving you, we have numbed our hearts with distractions.

And here we will stay, not because we are happy in our sins,

but because we cannot awaken our own hearts or heal ourselves.

Our disease is too far advanced for any doctor save one.

And if your own people are sick of soul, what hope is there for others?

The land is full of violence, and the church half-hearted and cold.

The Bible is open, but there is so little fire and light from on high.

Come down and visit us again in the power of your Spirit.

Restore to us the desire for holy living and for just and loving relationships.

Send us prophets to hedge us in and point us towards Jesus Christ.

Call us out of our hiding places and into the light that leads to peace.

Speak to us now and pierce our hearts as we stand in silence before you. Amen.
