



Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 1:1–25

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Be Prepared

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

Most of us have heard of Billy Graham. Since the 50's Dr. Graham has conducted hundreds of evangelistic crusades throughout the world. Most of us have seen him preach on TV and how thousands walk the aisle in that moment of decision. But what few of us realize is the amount of preparation that goes to bringing Billy Graham to a city. Only after extensive research is a Crusade placed on the calendar, and that's most often done years in advance. And then Graham representatives come to the city and begin work in the community months in advance. They put in countless hours promoting the crusade. Thousands of counselors are trained. Hundreds of prayer meetings are held. All this takes place because they believe that without preparation the event itself will fail.

It's no different with Christmas. In order for the event of Christmas to be successful, there has to be some preparation. Some of us may have sort of written off Christmas. Maybe it brings up too many old issues for us. Maybe we're sick of the commercialization of it all. Maybe we're one of those Christians who feels like every day ought to be a celebration of the birth of Christ so why make such a big deal out of December 25? I can identify with some of those feelings. But I'm not ready to give up on Christmas. I'm not ready to give up on it because as creatures bound in time and space we need real time and space markers in our lives which remind us of the great events that define our faith. But I also believe that if our Christmas is to be spiritually successful, we're going to have to fight for it, and the way to do that is through preparation. That's why we talk about this strange thing called Advent starting four weeks prior to Christmas. Advent is all about preparation.

Sometimes we forget that before God sent his Son into the world he saw to it that the way be prepared. Jesus arrived on the scene only after 400 years of silence from God – preparation. He arrived only after numerous people were visited by an angel named Gabriel – preparation. God even saw fit to prepare the way for his Son by sending a man named John to call people to repentance. God is into preparation.

This morning we're starting a study of the gospel of Luke. The Gospel writer who focuses most on preparation is Luke. I wonder why that is. Maybe it was

because he was a physician. We all know the amount of preparation it takes to become a doctor. Or maybe it had something to do with the purpose of his writing. Luke was a prolific writer. He wrote more of the NT than anyone else, including Paul! Luke tells us of his purpose in the opening of his gospel.

"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:1-4).

Luke's purpose is that a man named Theophilus would know the exact truth about the things he'd been taught; specifically, the truth about Jesus Christ. Theophilus was probably a gentile who had become a Christian, and Luke wants him to get the straight scoop. Luke himself was a gentile who had never seen Jesus, but he took the accounts of those who were eyewitnesses of Christ; he investigated everything carefully; and he laid it out in logical order. It was a two volume work: Volume I is his gospel; Volume II is the book of Acts. In a day and age of best selling books on lost gospels it's good to know that someone, a very well-educated, thorough researcher, did his homework.

And so, in keeping with his purpose, Luke carefully chronicles what happened before Christ was born. It was all about preparation for the coming of Christ. I want to ask you this morning, are you prepared for Christmas? I don't mean do you have your tree up, or have you done your shopping, but are you *really* prepared? Are you prepared for the arrival of God's Son? You might wonder how you do that. How do you really prepare for Christmas? Luke helps us here too. He helps us by telling the story of an old Jewish priest and his wife. We're introduced to this couple in vv. 5-7.

"In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of

Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years."

We see here that Zacharias was a priest and Elizabeth was a descendant of priests. That's not all that unusual. The priesthood was divided up into 24 divisions in those days, which amounted to about 18,000 priests. Most of them worked small farms and were poor. But given the times this was an unusual couple. Luke says they were righteous in God's sight; they kept his commandments. This doesn't mean they were without sin, but unlike many priests of that day they were examples of genuine faith. This is significant because of the other thing Luke tells us about them: they had no child. Elizabeth was barren, and the days of hoping for a child were long over. In those days, to be barren was a sign of a spiritual defect in the wife. They didn't have fertility specialists back then; they simply believed God closed a woman's womb because he held some grudge against her. So a barren woman was a disgraced woman. It wasn't uncommon for a husband to divorce his wife because of her supposed flaw. In essence, Elizabeth was forced to walk through life with a sign hung around her neck, which read "sinner." You think you don't want to go to church sometimes? Think how she felt! And though Zacharias didn't have quite the same stigma to deal with, he still lived with the deep disappointment of having no child to carry on the family name; a tragedy for a man.

Many of us have something in our lives like this, something that rightly or wrongly brings disgrace like an empty womb. It could be something we've done in the past. It could be an addiction that we battle every day. Maybe we've been in prison. Maybe we've been divorced. Maybe we've been fired. Maybe we've been abandoned. Any one of those things can hang like a sign around your neck for all to see. Or maybe you're like Zacharias. You've been ambushed by some tragedy or disappointment that you never could have expected. Maybe like this couple you've been unable to have children. You wonder if you will ever be able to really enjoy life again. Just this week a young woman I know who has been serving on the staff of Young Life with her husband up in the city died of cancer. She's so much better off now, but think of her husband trying to pick up the pieces. Life does that to us. It does that even to good people; people who are trying to follow the Lord.

At least for Zacharias there was his work. Luke tells us in vv. 8-10 that while Zacharias was doing his priestly service in Jerusalem he was chosen by lot to enter the Holy Place in the temple and burn incense, which was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. While he was inside the temple, the people would be outside offering prayers, waiting for him to come out. He would cast incense on the altar, prostrate himself, and then leave. But on this day Zacharias didn't come out for a long time. Look at vv. 11-14.

"And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.'"

Our tendency is to read this like he had a visit from an old friend. But this was an angel! And it scared him to death! I don't know what that says about angels but it wasn't Della Reese! Nevertheless, this angel comes with some good news: Elizabeth would give birth to a son, whom they were to name John, and he would bring joy not only to them but to many others as well. But I'm struck by how the angel puts this. He says, "*Your petition has been heard.*" What petition? I didn't hear any petition. He must be talking about his prayer for a son, which I would imagine at age 60 he stopped praying a long time ago! I'll bet Zacharias had forgotten that prayer, but God hadn't, though it sure took him awhile to answer it. Maybe he also had in mind another prayer. As a righteous man, Zacharias would have prayed for the Messiah to come. In vv. 15-17 the angel says that his son's mission and purpose would be to "*make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*"

Have you ever been promised something that was beyond your wildest dreams; something so out-of-the-box that you can hardly believe it? That's what this was for Zacharias. Look at v.18. **"Zacharias said to the angel, 'How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years.'"** I love how he says, "I'm an old man and my wife is advanced in years." That's a tactful way of putting it. That's a smart man! "But," he says, "that being the case, I'm going to need some proof, a sign that this is really going to happen." The angel didn't like that. If an angel is scary, think about what a mad angel is like! He says,

"The angel answered and said to him, 'I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you shall be silent

and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time” (Luke 1:19-20).

Gabriel was a famous angel who would have been well-known to Zacharias. So not only do you have an angel, you have a mad angel, and not only do you have a mad angel, you have a famous mad angel. He says, “Don’t you know who you’re talking to? Don’t you know where I’ve been hanging out? What kind of sign did you want?” And then he picks up his remote control and pushes the mute button and says, “If you want a sign, I’ll give you a sign. You’ll be unable to speak until my promise is made good.”

So Zacharias is left in the temple with nothing to say. He’s been muted. Meanwhile the people outside are wondering if he’s had a heart attack in there. When he finally does come out he’s unable to speak, so he starts signing. Imagine trying to describe what had just happened to him using sign language! Finally, when he is all done with his priestly duties, he goes on home. Let’s pick up the story in vv. 23-25.

“When the days of his priestly service were ended, he went back home. After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant, and she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying, ‘This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men.’”

I find these verses very humorous. I mean, think about it. Zacharias can’t speak. He returns to his home in the hill country of Judea where Elizabeth is. The first night, as they’re getting ready for bed, Zacharias has that look in his eye. She hasn’t seen that look for a long time! She’s thinking, “You’ve got to be kidding!” Then he starts with the sign language again. Imagine him trying to communicate his intentions! Scripture spares us the details. It just says, *“after these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant.”* And then she stayed in seclusion for five months. We don’t know why she did this. Maybe she was embarrassed. Some say she was afraid of losing the baby. Luke doesn’t tell us, but he does tell us she spent that time thanking and praising God. During this time she was thinking and talking about how God had worked in her life to bless her and to take away her disgrace among men.

Think with me about these two. First there is Zacharias. Here is a man who is righteous. He’s old. He’s a priest. He knows God. He knows what it means to serve God. If there ever was a real saint, it’s this guy. BUT, he still had some growing to do. I mean, God sends the angel Gabriel

to him. God makes a marvelous promise. But what does he do? He doubts God. He underestimates God. The angel says it flat out: *“you did not believe my words.”* We don’t always think of that as sin, but it is. Underestimating God is just as serious as rebelling against God. Look at the gospels – the thing that frustrated Jesus the most was a lack of faith. And faith isn’t just something we exercise to get into God’s family. Zacharias is an example of a person who has known the Lord for a long time. He goes to church. He pays his tithes. He leads a small group. He goes on mission trips. He prays before meals. He reads the Bible every day. He does all the right things in all the right places in all the right ways, but when God comes along and challenges him to a new level of faith, he’s not ready. I like to use my cruise control. I prefer to use my cruise control. But my cruise control doesn’t work in traffic. Zacharias was on spiritual cruise control, going about his religious duties, he could do it all with his eyes closed, but God chose to throw him into traffic, and he’s not ready; he doesn’t want to turn off his cruise control.

On the other hand, think about Elizabeth. Throughout Luke’s gospel, we’ll see how he highlights the faithfulness of women. Elizabeth’s response to this gift is set in contrast to that of her husband. He’s forced into silence; she chooses solitude. He can’t speak, but she can. When she speaks she speaks about God’s grace and mercy to her; of how he had taken away her shame and disgrace among men. She HAD felt disgraced; she HAD felt shame. But she hadn’t lapsed into bitterness. She had continued to serve God. She seems much more prepared than Zacharias was to believe and receive God’s gift.

This couple reminds me that it really doesn’t matter how long you’ve known God, or how well you’ve obeyed God, or how faithfully you’ve served God; there is always room for growth. And God is committed to stretching and growing the faith of people like Zacharias and Elizabeth. Zacharias wasn’t prepared for Christmas because he didn’t believe that God could step into his life and answer long forgotten prayers in out-of-the-box ways. I think most of us are secretly disappointed with God but afraid to admit it. So, like old Zacharias we just do what we’re supposed to do, never really believing that God is at work in our life to bless us in ways that will blow our minds. How about you? Do you believe God is able to step into your life and bring joy and blessing where there has been disgrace and disappointment? That’s what the coming of Christ really means for each one of us. What Elizabeth says in v. 25 is true of each of us because God sent his Son - he’s looked with favor on us, to take away our disgrace among men. Do you believe that?

We may believe that God could do that for someone else, but not for us. We think, "You don't know what I've done. You don't know what I've gone through. You don't know how hopeless my situation is." Some of us have become so cynical and jaded by life that we no longer believe God is at work to bless us. If we're stuck in our unbelief, we're not ready for God's gift. But God has some interesting ways of getting through to us.

James Dobson relates a story of an elderly woman named Stella Thornhope who was struggling with her first Christmas alone. Her husband had died just a few months prior through a slow developing cancer. Now, several days before Christmas, she was almost snowed in by a brutal weather system. She felt terribly alone, so much so she decided she was not going to decorate for Christmas.

Late that afternoon the doorbell rang, and there was a delivery boy with a box. He said, "Mrs. Thornhope?" She nodded. He said, "Would you sign here?" She invited him to step inside and closed the door to get away from the cold. She signed the paper and said, "What's in the box?" The young man laughed and opened up the flap, and inside was a little puppy, a golden Labrador Retriever. The delivery boy picked up the squirming pup and explained, "This is for you, Ma'am. He's six weeks old, completely housebroken." The young puppy began to wiggle in happiness at being released from captivity.

"Who sent this?" Mrs. Thornhope asked.

The young man set the animal down and handed her an envelope and said, "It's all explained here in this envelope, Ma'am. The dog was bought last July while its mother was still pregnant. It was meant to be a Christmas gift to you." The young man then handed her a book, "How to Care for Your Labrador Retriever."

In desperation she again asked, "Who sent me this puppy?"

As the young man turned to leave, he said, "Your husband, Ma'am. Merry Christmas."

She opened up the letter from her husband. He had written it three weeks before he died and left it with the kennel owners to be delivered with the puppy as his last Christmas gift to her. The letter was full of love and encouragement and admonishments

to be strong. He vowed that he was waiting for the day when she would join him. He had sent her this young animal to keep her company until then.

She wiped away the tears, put the letter down, and then remembering the puppy at her feet, she picked up that golden furry ball and held it to her neck. Then she looked out the window at the lights that outlined the neighbor's house, and she heard from the radio in the kitchen the strains of "Joy to the World, the Lord has Come." Suddenly Stella felt the most amazing sensation of peace washing over her. Her heart felt a joy and a wonder greater than the grief and loneliness.

"Little fella," she said to the dog, "it's just you and me. But you know what? There's a box down in the basement I'll bet you'll like. It's got a little Christmas tree in it and some decorations and some lights that are going to impress you. And there's a manger scene down there. Let's go get it."

God has a way of sending a signal of hope to remind us life is stronger than death. Light is more powerful than darkness. God is more powerful than Satan. Good will overcome evil. Joy is stronger than disappointment. That's the message of Christmas. The question is, are we prepared for it? Are we able to believe that God is acting for us in ways we never could have imagined to take away our disgrace and disappointment?

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