

**Engage Bible Study: Luke 1:5-56**  
**September 19-21, 2011**

**Introduction**

Contrary to popular belief most of our forefathers in this country were not Christians; they were deists. Deists believe that there is a God who created the world but that God has pretty much decided not to interfere in the affairs of this world or our lives. Thomas Jefferson was a deist. He enjoyed the Bible and thought that Jesus was an outstanding moral teacher but he didn't like the miracles of the New Testament, including the resurrection. Jefferson didn't believe that miracles – the suspension of natural laws – could actually happen. And so Jefferson actually created his own Bible, keeping the ethical teachings of Jesus but removing all the supernatural mumbo jumbo.

How about you? Do you believe in miracles? Do you believe that miracles still happen today? Sometimes I think we struggle a bit with the concept of miracles because it brings to mind only the big things, the suspension of natural law, the parting of the Red Sea, walking on water and raising people from the dead...and most of us have never seen those things happen. So we conclude that maybe God just doesn't do miracles anymore. But what if there are miracles right in front of our eyes every day...and we just fail to recognize the hand of God in it all?

The conception and birth of a child is an "every day miracle" but a miracle nonetheless in my opinion. While it's the epitome of "natural" it is absolutely stunning in its intricacy and leaves us breathless with wonder.

The first section of Luke that we're going to look at is filled with lots of miracles, including the conception of two remarkable children – cousins, named John and Jesus. Let's look into the circumstances of their conception.

**Announcing the One who Goes Before (1:5-25)**

Let's begin with John [READ 5-25]. As I mentioned last week Luke pays special attention to the politics of his day and sets his story within that context...so you'll notice the mention of King Herod. There are at least three reasons Luke might do this. First, it dates the narrative...telling Theophilus when it happened. Second, this story that Luke is about to tell will have an impact upon the politicians mentioned. Herod will play a role in this drama. Third, the central figure of this story, Jesus, is a King who will ultimately trump the authority of all political figures who seemed to have so much power at the time.

Luke tells us some important things about Zechariah and Elizabeth in this section. They are both from priestly families and they are righteous people and blameless. That doesn't mean that they were perfect but that they sought to live their faith. In addition they are old and childless, which was seen as a disgrace and often a sign of God's disfavor in the ancient world. Right from the start we encounter two "outsiders" whom God will use in mighty ways. This also connects Elizabeth to a common OT motif of barren women whom God blessed...can you name a few? (Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel to name a few).

Zechariah is a priest, one of approximately 18,000 working for the temple. Twice each day a priest was chosen by lot (sort of like rolling dice to make decisions). The chosen priest would light incense on the altar before God in the Holy of holies...the most sacred place known to the Jewish people. A priest only got this

opportunity once in a lifetime...literally. And their fear of God was so great that a rope would be tied around the priest's waist so that if God struck that priest down they could pull his dead body out with going into the holy place themselves. So...you might imagine that it was a nerve-racking experience to serve this function. And Zechariah's number gets called.

As he's lighting the incense on the altar the angel, Gabriel, appears to him. Gabriel was one of seven archangels in late Judaism...and the one that usually pulled messenger duty. Gabriel not only tells Zechariah that he and Elizabeth will have a child in their old age; he also tells Zechariah several important things about this child. He'll be called John. He'll be used by God to prepare people for what God is about to do. In fact, the language that's used here is drawn straight from the Old Testament and it refers to repentance (turning back to the Lord) and restoration (God will bring the people back from exile). Zechariah is told that his son will live an ascetic lifestyle common to people who took vows to show their devotion to God. And John will do this in the spirit and the power of Elijah...another prophet who was given the task of turning people's hearts back to God.

And how does Zechariah respond to this announcement? He doubts. Can you blame him? And for his doubt Gabriel silences him. Zechariah will be unable to speak until the child is born...which highlights one of the core themes of this section: God will bring his promises to pass. Now it's clear that Zechariah is struck mute, but take a quick look ahead at 1:62. Why did they need to motion to Zechariah? Why didn't they just call to him? Could it be that Zechariah was also struck deaf during this time? We don't know.

What we do know is that when he comes out of the Holy of holies the people have gathered for the traditional blessing that the serving priest would also give...but Zechariah can't give a blessing. He can't speak. And it's clear to the people that he has seen some kind of vision. Little do they know what Zechariah has seen! And when Zechariah returns home sure enough Elizabeth conceives and lives in seclusion for five months. Why? Perhaps to wait until she's showing to prove that she was indeed pregnant!

### **The Announcement of Jesus' Birth (1:26-38)**

With that we move straight to another story of a child to be born [**READ 1:26-38**]. What parallels do you see between these two announcement stories?

- An angel announces
- The child will be a boy
- His name is given
- The Holy Spirit will play an important role in their life and work
- The conception is improbable
- God has a plan
- A bit of doubt is expressed

But there are significant differences between the stories. Mary and Joseph are betrothed, not married. Betrothal means that they had been promised to one another, probably by parental arrangement and probably quite early in their lives. In addition, this announcement is made to a peasant girl...not an important priest...again taking up the theme of God working through the underdog.

The role of these two boys is quite different, though both are part of God's plan. Gabriel uses two titles to describe the child to be born: Son of the Most High and king. Luke will spend the rest of his Gospel spelling out what these titles mean. To Mary at this moment it probably meant little more than that her son would become royalty.

Unlike Matthew Luke does not go into any details about the social complications of an unmarried woman conceiving a child, but there is an emphasis on Mary being a virgin. It would appear that the virgin birth of Jesus was not central in the very early Church because Mark says absolutely nothing about it. But by the time Luke's Gospel was written it was certainly a part of Jesus' story...and by the writing of the Apostle's Creed, no later than 390, it was part of the central teaching of the Church. But scholars have raised significant questions about the virgin birth.

Look at Isaiah 7:14 – the Hebrew is “young woman”. When the NT was translated into Greek the word was changed to “virgin”. Here's how one modern biblical scholar answers the question, “Was Jesus born of a virgin:

*Only in the same sense that [a person of privileged birth] was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, and no one ever asks whether the spoon was sterling or silver plate. No one asks that question because we all know that 'silver spoon' is a figure of speech. Its point is that Bush was born into privilege and wealth.*

*Virgin birth is an ancient figure of speech, a way of pointing, not to privilege and wealth, but to extraordinary personal qualities exhibited by an individual. For example, Alexander the Great was said to be virgin-born—more than three hundred years before Jesus' birth. The same was said of the great Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus who died in 14 C.E., about sixteen years before Jesus' death. His father was the god Apollo who conceived him in his mother, Atia.*

*These great, but pre-Christian, historical figures were just two of numerous virgin-born humans. A number of great religious figures were also virgin-born. That should tell us that a virgin birth in the ancient world was not a literal belief. People used the term 'virgin birth' not because they believed in miracles, but because it was an attempt to say something about the greatness of a person. – Dr. Susan Thistlethwaite*

I'm not sure exactly what to do with that information! A whole theology explaining Jesus' nature as both fully human and fully divine has been built on the virgin birth, but Paul never mentions it. It would seem at least in the first century Jesus' death and resurrection were far more important than the circumstances of his birth.

In any event Mary, unlike Zechariah, surrenders to the will of God...no matter how improbably it may seem. Luke again is showing that a priest is upstaged by a simple peasant girl when it comes to faith!

Gabriel also tells Mary that her cousin, Elizabeth, is six-months into a pregnancy. Without e-mail or cell phone Mary would have no way of knowing this good news in the family, but this news is the transition point for the next section which is Mary's visit to Elizabeth.

## **Mary's Visit to Elizabeth (1:39-56)**

[READ 39-56]. Mary wastes no time but “makes haste” to visit Elizabeth. The journey from Nazareth to the hill country of Judea was between 80-100 miles...and Mary didn't take Amtrak. She either rode a donkey or she walked...and let's not forget that she was pregnant. Mary may be young but she's tough. But what Luke really wants us to see is Mary's devotion and faith in what Gabriel told her to be true about Elizabeth.

As soon as Mary greets Elizabeth John jumps in the womb and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit humbles herself before Mary and expresses how blessed she is to be visited by Mary, the mother of her Lord. This is an important theme. In the ancient world the younger gave honor to the older. The firstborn was more esteemed than the second born. But here things are reversed. John clearly knows even from the womb that Jesus is the greater of the two, and so does Elizabeth who is deferential toward Mary even though she is significantly older. The older Elizabeth and her son will close an age while the young Mary and her son will usher in a new age. All of this is reminiscent of the story of Jacob and Esau who wrestled in Rebekah's womb. In both cases the elder will serve the younger. This is the first of two great reversals that Luke will highlight in this section.

Elizabeth blesses Mary on two grounds: she has been chosen to by God to be the mother of the Lord and she has believed the promise of God. And this is one of the core themes of the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel...that there is great blessing in believing what God proclaims...especially the Good News of God's love and forgiveness in Jesus. We can trust that God will do what God says. In traditional liturgy Elizabeth's song is called The Visitation.

However, the dominant part of this section is Mary's Song, generally referred to as The Magnificat, and it has two core sections. The first section is brief and in it Mary praises God for what God has done for her. God has elevated a poor, obscure peasant girl by making her a part of God's divine plan. What God has done for Mary anticipates and models what God will do for the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed of the world...which is the central theme of the second portion of Mary's song – the triumph of God's purposes for all people everywhere.

Notice what Mary's child will do:

- Scatter the proud
- Bring down the powerful
- Lift up the lowly
- Fill the hungry with good things
- Send the rich away empty

Here's the theme of the underdog again. And while the words sound beautiful they should trouble you deeply...because on a global scale WE – every single one of us – are the powerful and the rich. Let's not forget that half the population of this planet lives on \$2 or less a day. What does that mean when we consider the mission of the Messiah? At the very least it should mean this: God has a clear preference for the poor, the lowly, the broken, the powerless and the voiceless. And God has a passion for restoring them. We are called to align our lives with God's agenda...not building our own kingdoms but working to care for the ones Jesus came to lift up. I know that there are people here who are tired of me lifting up the Mission Outpost and raising money for Feed My Starving Children and coming alongside children at Echo Park Elementary. I've even heard people say, “All this church cares about is serving others. Who's going to serve me?” But from the very start of

his Gospel Luke shows us very clearly why these are critical issues for any community that wants to follow Jesus.

I'd also like you look carefully at how Mary articulates what God is up to in Jesus. There is nothing said about the afterlife. There is nothing said about Jesus saving us from our sins. There is nothing said about God being angry with us and Jesus needing to die to placate God's anger. Instead, what God is up to in Jesus, according to this first chapter in Luke, is salvation in this world...right here and right now. God is at work putting things right, restoring justice. Far too many of us assume that the Gospel is all about who goes to heaven and who doesn't ... but you just won't find that theme here because it's not a core theme of the Gospel. The Good News according to the Gospels is that the Kingdom of God is at hand...that in Jesus God is ushering in a new Kingdom in which all things are restored.

Finally, notice the verb tenses in Mary's Song. It talks about what God HAS done, as if these things were already accomplished. That is prophetic language. The prophets speak about the promises of God in such vivid terms that what God promises to do is articulated as if it is already done.

### **Conclusion**

So, what do these verses mean for us? There are lots of things to consider. Here are just a few:

- If God can use a poor peasant girl to give birth to the Savior, what extraordinary things could God do through ordinary you and me?
- For what can you sing a song of thanksgiving today? In what ways do you know yourself to be blessed? In our current sermon series we're trying to help people to see beyond all the things they see that they lack and to see the abundance of God all around them. For what can you thank God today?
- Is the investment of your life aligned with God's purpose revealed in Mary's Song? That's an especially challenging question as we pray about our financial commitment to this ministry.