

Sermon 2, The Child of Promise, Pt. 1, Luke 1:1-25

Proposition: Luke opens with the problem of the unblessed righteous, in microcosm and macrocosm, and resolves the problem in microcosm to highlight the truth that the birth of John the Baptist will begin to fulfill God's promises to His people.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, this morning we pause our Hebrews series and turn to the gospel of Luke. This sermon is the first installment in our Christmas series. We will look at Luke 1 and possibly, depending on how long we spend in ch. 1, at Luke 2 as well this Christmas season. We will be in this gospel both morning and evening starting next Sunday, as we celebrate the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ into the world.

My heart bubbles over with excitement as I look at this text. As you can see, I have gone full English teacher in my outline this week. We are going to look at the narrative, as such and unapologetically. Luke has set up this gospel with absolute brilliance, and this first event is a microcosm of the larger problem afflicting Israel. Yet, with the intervention of God, who sends John the Baptist as the child of promise, Zechariah and Elizabeth's personal and theological problem is resolved. The whole setup is a clear sign that God is about to act to save not just this righteous old couple, but Israel at large. The unblessed righteous will not stay that way forever; the birth of John signals the dawning of the age of fulfillment, as v. 1 terms it. So come with me and let's tour Luke's literary genius here, getting what we need not only to delight in the beauty of this work but also in its truth. God is about to visit and redeem His people! That is the message of Luke 1:5-25.

I. The Narrative: Context, vv. 1, 5

Let us begin by examining the context in which Luke sets the narrative we have just read, and indeed, in which he sets his whole book. There are three different sorts of context here that I want to mention to you this morning.

A. The Narrative Context: Fulfillment of God's Promises, v. 1

The first is the narrative context. "Many," declares the evangelist, "have taken in hand to set forth in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us." Now, that word "fulfilled" is matched with another word — a word Luke does not mention until v. 67, but a word that we automatically associate with the word "fulfillment." That, of course, is the word "prophecy" or the word "promise." When Luke announces that his narrative is a narrative of fulfillment, he is putting it into the context of an ongoing story — the story of God's dealings with His people that was begun in the book of Genesis and that runs through all thirty-nine books of the OT, culminating in Malachi.

In other words, I want to remind you that the Bible in your lap did not fall from heaven complete with 66 books. It was given over time, at many times and in many ways through the prophets. To publish just these 66 and no more, and to bind them together within one set of covers, is a decision made for weighty theological reasons. These books cohere together; each one provides the context in which to understand all the rest. Luke signals that his book is not intended to stand on its own when he says that he will provide a narrative of fulfillment. And of course, the further quotes and incidents of his narrative, even just those on the first page of it that we'll examine today, make it clear that the prophecies he's drawing from are found in the

Scriptures of Israel, or what we call the Old Testament. To understand him rightly, then, you have to know what the OT contains. We will look in a few minutes at four barren righteous women from the OT, women whose stories Luke is drawing on in his portrayals of Elizabeth and Mary. Know that when you hear this word “fulfillment,” you are being told that the narrative you’re reading began long before the beginning of this particular installment. There are some new characters in Luke’s gospel, but the main character is God, who is the main character throughout all of Scripture.

B. The Historical Context: The Days of Herod the King, v. 5a

Well, if the literary or narrative context in which to read Luke is the rest of the Bible, the historical context is given here in v. 5. Luke tells us “there was, in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest.” The time in history, then, is pegged as being between 40 B.C. and 4 B.C., for these were the days in which Herod the Great was king. Herod was not a Jew, but an Idumean or Edomite to use the OT language. Edom was a former colony of Judah, and had been incorporated in various empires over the centuries. But Herod craftily sought the blessing of Rome on his rule, and, having received kingship over Judea from the Senate, he returned to Judea and spent three years conquering it and setting up his own kingdom there.

Herod was an incredibly wicked man who killed many of his own sons. Matthew tells us that he slaughtered all the boys two years old and under in Bethlehem and its environs. Luke doesn’t have to tell us all this; he assumes that we either know or can quickly find it out. To say “the days of Herod the king” is to say “bad days for God’s people.” Well, that’s a little one-sided. Herod engaged in many large building schemes, including on the walls of Jerusalem and the glorious Temple complex. But he did not do this from love for God, or even from love of Judea, but rather from love of himself and his own glory.

Remember how Stalin was not a Russian, but a Georgian? Even so Herod was not a Jew, but an Idumean, tyrannizing wickedly over the people of God.

C. The Setting: Judea, v. 5b

Well, the third aspect of the setting is the place in which the story is set — Roman Judea. The commentators hasten to point out that action takes place in a number of different regions, not just the exact borders of Herod’s kingdom. The point, regardless, is that ancient Israel, the land described throughout the OT, is the same place in which this story is set. Not only is this a story of fulfillment; it is also a story located in the same place where God previously dealt with His people.

II. The Narrative: Issues, vv. 5-7

Well, that is the setting — Judea under Herod, when the era of fulfillment dawns. Having sketched the setting in a phrase or two, Luke launches his narrative by presenting the issues that are going to drive the plot. It’s not a magic ring, or a movement in world politics.

A. In Microcosm: A Righteous Couple Unblessed, Old, Barren, and Shamed

The issue that the evangelist presents to us is a lot more personal, a lot more visceral, than that. The issue is a righteous couple, who according to God’s word and promises should be blessed with fertility, and yet have not been. Unless you have struggled with infertility, or been close to

someone who has, you may read right over vv. 5-7 and not even notice that Luke is presenting the issue that the story is going to address. This is, in a certain sense, the heart of the conflict that is unfolding. It is a conflict between the promises of God and the providence of God, between God's stated intentions and His actual decrees.

Remember Psalm 128, and its promise to the man who fears the LORD and walks in His ways? "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table" (v. 3). Yet where is the fulfillment of this promise to Zachariah and Elizabeth? That is the issue that is going to drive Luke's narrative here in the first part of ch. 1. They are righteous, but they have been put to shame. They have grown old without receiving the blessing of children.

Now, why do I say that this story, which will find its resolution within the next twenty verses, is a microcosm of the whole book? Because just as this one family finds blessing through the birth of the promised son, so the whole family of God's people will find blessing through the birth of the greater promised son.

B. In Macrocosm: God's Righteous People Unblessed

That's the macrocosm, the bigger world.

1. Under Herod's Rule, v. 5

We have already seen that Judea languishes under Herod's godless tyranny.

2. Unvisited by God, vv. 68, 78

That lack of blessing takes the specific form of being unvisited by God. Zachariah speaks twice about God visiting His people, and says that this is what has happened in the birth of John the Baptist (or Baptizer, as my bigoted Presbyterian friends call him). God had been silent for four hundred years since the days of Malachi. Once again, then, the conflict between God's promises and His providence is just as acute in the macrocosm as it is in the microcosm.

3. Barren and Lacking the Promised Seed

God's people have not been blessed with the deliverer; the seed of the serpent is wreaking havoc among them, and the seed of the woman and the line of David are nowhere to be seen. The situation of the macrocosm is very similar to the situation of the microcosm.

In other words, Luke has presented his triggering incident to us here. Zachariah and Elizabeth are in a place very similar to the place of Israel as a whole.

III. The Narrative: Allusions

And that place is a place where we as readers have been before.

A. Barren Righteous Women

The theme of barren but righteous women has surfaced at least four times in the OT — always in relation to a promised son.

1. Sarah

The mother of all of these figures, in a sense, is Sarah. God promises a seed to Abraham but makes him wait years, maybe decades, for it. The problem was not Abraham; he is quite fertile and has seven sons with other women. The problem is with Sarah, who is barren. This is a huge curse, a shame.

2. Rachel

Then there's Rachel, the favored wife of Jacob who can't seem to produce a son for her husband while her rival/sister wife Leah has son after son.

3. Mrs. Manoah

Then there's the wife of Manoah, who has no son yet is visited by an angel who promises her and her husband that they will have a son.

4. Hannah

Finally, of course, we have Hannah, who is praying with such zeal that Eli thinks she's drunk, and whose rival wife Peninah is always ragging her about being barren.

What do all of these women have in common?

B. Sons of Promise

They are barren, and yet they are the recipient of God's promise of a son.

1. Isaac, the Son of Promise

Isaac, of course, is a son in the main line, the line of Jesus. The narrative driver of the book of Genesis is this question of the son, or the "seed" as Moses terms it. Who will be the seed of the woman, and from what family will He come? Eve thinks that Cain is the one; those hopes are brutally dashed. But God tells Abraham that in Abraham's seed all the families of the earth will be blessed, and He also tells Abraham that this will happen through Isaac and therefore not through Ishmael or the sons of Keturah.

2. Joseph, the Doubly Blessed "Firstborn" of Jacob

Rachel, too, cries out for children and God finally opens her womb — and she bears Joseph, the one who receives the double portion of the firstborn. He is younger than Reuben, but because of his faithfulness he has two tribes in Israel: Ephraim and Manasseh.

3. Samson, who Began to Save Israel

Then there is Samson, who began to save Israel. He didn't finish the job, but he started it.

4. Samuel, the Priest Who Anointed David as King

Finally, from Hannah came Samuel, the one whom God used to anoint David as the king. David is the greatest prototype of the Messiah in the OT — and Samuel is a key part of his story.

In other words, from the literary allusions established here in vv. 5-7, we read this notice of the barren couple and immediately begin expecting that they will give birth to a son of promise, one who is either in the Messianic line (like Isaac) or else closely associated with it (like the other three sons of promise). Luke is more than hinting that the problem in microcosm is going to be resolved.

IV. The Narrative: Inciting Incident, vv. 8-23

And so it quickly proves to be, of course. Zachariah goes to the temple, and there he receives what is (from his perspective) a completely unexpected announcement. Of course, from the reader's perspective this announcement is exactly what we would have guessed to be coming next.

A. Gabriel Promises a Son, vv. 8-17

The angel Gabriel appears to Zachariah, and he promises a son.

This son will be great in the sight of the Lord; he will be the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah, the one like Elijah who will turn the hearts of the fathers to children. We're not going to look in detail at the substance of the promise today; I hope to do that with you next Sunday morning. For now, though, I want you to see that in line with the expectations set up by the previous stories of God overcoming a woman's barrenness and sending His promised seed to her, Luke is presenting a clear rewrite of that old story.

B. Zachariah Doubts the Promise, v. 18

Yet in another allusion, particularly back to the story of Isaac, Zachariah doubts whether this can be. He asks the same question that Abraham and Sarah asked: How in the world can this happen for a couple as old as we are?

But unlike Abraham (and like Sarah), he did not ask in faith. He asked in doubt. He did not believe that it was real. We have this rule, you know: "If it seems too good to be true, it probably is." If a son is the one thing you've wanted your whole life, and are now way too old to get, then even when Gabriel himself appears and tells you that it's going to happen, you say "I don't think so."

C. Zachariah Struck Dumb, vv. 19-23

Yet Gabriel, a manner that to me sounds dispassionate yet forceful and decisive, says that God will not tolerate this kind of disbelief. In the background, one can hear the angel saying to Sarah "No, but you did laugh." These angels do not mess around, and you should not even think about trying to mess around with them. They may play, engaging in games we cannot even imagine — but they do not play them with us.

Zachariah should have known that God keeps His promises. There is not a single case recorded in Scripture where a miraculous birth was announced but then didn't happen. Obviously, you could say, those ones would have been cut from the narrative. Fine; but even so, to doubt God remains a sin, and one that is punished by nine months or more of total silence on the part of Zachariah.

Can you imagine this punishment? For some of us, it wouldn't change much. For others, it would be like dying. But the point of it is that God will save His people and He demands that we trust Him on that.

V. The Narrative: Fulfillment, vv. 24-25

The promise, of course, is fulfilled immediately: Elizabeth conceives. She is pregnant, just as the angel said she would be.

A. Setting Up the Next Scene, v. 24b

And then we have a brief setting up of the next scene. Why did Elizabeth hide herself? At least in part, in narrative terms, so that the announcement of her pregnancy could serve as a sign to Mary.

1. Mary Will Conceive, v. 36

Mary asks how she can conceive as a virgin; the angel responds, essentially, with another question: How could Elizabeth conceive at her advanced age? Yet she did, and therefore, the message is clear:

2. Nothing Is Impossible with God, v. 37

Nothing will be impossible with God. A barren woman can give birth; an old woman can have a child; a virgin can bear the savior of the world.

Elizabeth, then, hides herself in order to set up the next scene. Her very pregnancy with John is a sign from heaven that God will send the seed of promise and save His people.

B. God's Faithfulness, v. 25

Elizabeth meditates on God's faithfulness, and speaks up about it too.

1. Doing what He Said He'd Do

She first calls attention to what God has done for her. He did what He said He would do!

2. Redefining the Days, vv. 5, 7, 18

Also, He redefined the days. To all of you who are mourning over the condition of our land, the deadness of the church, the power of evil, the seeming absence of God's salvation, the crying need for revival, just look at this with me. Luke has mentioned "the days" three times already in this passage. We have in v. 5 "the days of Herod the king." In v. 7, Zachariah and Elizabeth are "advanced in days." And in v. 18, the fact that the couple is "well stricken in days" is repeated.

That's how Zachariah and Elizabeth look at time. They define their days according to their age, in the microcosm, and according to Herod's cruel and godless tyranny, in the macrocosm. But Elizabeth recognizes that God's work has redefined her days. These days are now the days in which God has looked upon her to take away her reproach.

Has God done that for you? Maybe not individually. But certainly He has done so corporately, and we are going to talk about that in just a moment.

3. Looking Upon His Child

God looked at her. When the Almighty looks at you, it is involved. It is caring. It is loving. For Him to look is to see your situation at a glance, and to love you in it. The Lord cares, and the Lord looks, and as we will see, the Lord visits.

4. Removing Shame

Elizabeth's shame is gone. She is blessed among women, for she has borne a son.

By the way, where did this attitude go? How did we buy the propaganda that we are happier without children, that the barren ones are the lucky ones? That's not how God thinks about it. God loves His Son and these narratives of barren women all presuppose that the greatest joy a woman can have is a son. To be barren, meanwhile, is a shame, a reproach in front of everyone.

C. The Narrative Issue Resolved in Microcosm, v. 25

So as we get into Luke we can see that the narrative issue has, in microcosm, been resolved. The righteous, barren couple is still righteous (albeit the man is under the discipline of God so that he can learn a little more faith). The issue in macrocosm is just getting started — but the way this issue of the promised son turned out, we can have great confidence that God is going to do what He said He'd do. He is going to send The Promised Seed and the coming of that seed is going to redefine the days, not just for one couple but for all Israel. He is going to look upon Israel as His firstborn son, and act to visit and redeem His people. He is going to remove their shame among

the nations. They trusted in a God who allowed them to be conquered by Babylon, Persia, Hellenistic kingdoms, and Rome. That is shameful — but Luke is more than hinting that God is going to save His people. What He did for Zachariah and Elizabeth, he will do for all of them.

So Merry Christmas! God has visited and redeemed His people. You have nothing to fear. Don't be Zachariah, saying "I don't believe it." Be Elizabeth. Recognize that you are honored, not shamed. He has looked upon His people and redefined our days. That's why we celebrate Christmas. That's why you're listening to this sermon. Our God keeps His promises. He gives the barren woman a home and makes her the joyful mother of children. Hallelujah! Amen.