

Gospel in Luke 2

Turn to Luke 1. We're going through Luke 1 and 2, and trying to figure out what the "gospel" is. Luke 1 and 2 tell us about the birth of John the Baptist and of Jesus, and there are many speeches in these two chapters about John and about Jesus.

These speeches are about what God was doing, and God's actions were good news to the angels and people who spoke. So we're reading the speeches to find out what they thought these births meant.

We're doing this because *we* are in this story. It really is *our* story too. In one way or another God has come to us, too, and he had told *us* about his son Jesus. So what we're really asking is this: what is the gospel, the good news, that has come to *us*?

There is much praise to God in Luke 1-2, so at the end of the sermon time today there will be a time for short prayers of thanks to God. Think ahead what you might say.

Zechariah's Praise, Part One (Luke 1:67-75)

Zechariah has been unable to speak since he doubted Gabriel in the Temple, but now John has just been born to Elizabeth, and Zechariah can speak again.

⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: ⁶⁸ "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), ⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—⁷² to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham: ⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Zechariah's speech is all Israel. For Zechariah, the birth of John means good things for Israel, and that's what this first part is all about: Z. praises the God of Israel, who has come to *his people*, he has brought salvation for *us* from *the house of David*, from *our enemies* and all who hate *us*, mercy to *our ancestors*, *our father Abraham*, rescue from the hand of *our enemies*.

We saw this earlier in Luke 1, especially in what Gabriel told Mary. This continues to intrigue me. Luke is the only Gentile writer of Scripture, and Luke later makes a lot of the gospel going to all the nations. But he sure respects the Jewish part, too.

Something else here that we see again: God remembers old promises and acts on them: *as he said through his holy prophets long ago, mercy to our ancestors, remember his holy covenant, oath to our father Abraham*. God remembers his old promises and keeps them.

And what is it that God has promised that he will do? What is Z's picture of blessing? What exactly is Z looking forward to, that John's birth means is much closer? Vv74-75:

To rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Zechariah wants two things: freedom from enemies, and to serve God in righteousness all his days. For him, that's perfect. His speech has nothing about punishing enemies, or ruling them. He wants to be free from them.

And he wants all Israel to serve God in holiness and righteousness all their days. He wants Israel to be free from enemies, and that Israel's hearts would be turned to God so that Israel would serve God rightly. John's birth means this blessing is a big step closer.

Zechariah's Praise, Part Two (Luke 1:76-79)

Z. switches from the big picture to the part his baby son John will play in this.

⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, ⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven ⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

Z. here says things that he first heard from Gabriel in the Temple, most of a year earlier. John will give God's people *the knowledge of salvation*, which here means something like *the experience of salvation*.

The first kind of saving the people will need is not from enemies, but from sins. Through John, God will bring to his people the experience of being saved, and this will happen by their sins being forgiven.

We sometimes think and pray as if being forgiven for our sins is our idea, and we need somehow to convince a reluctant God that he should forgive our sins. We live in doubt that we're really forgiven. This is all so backward.

It starts with God's tender mercy to people, not with our feeling guilty before. God makes the first move, because of his tender mercy to people. Verse 77: John will *give God's people the experience of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God.*

Doubting whether or not God has forgiven us shows a fundamental ignorance of how salvation got started in the first place.

Forgiveness of sins, begins with God's tender mercy, God mercifully deciding that these people need sins forgiven, and he needs to work in them so they'll even ask for it.

So God stirs us with preachers and his Spirit so that we will ask for forgiveness, and then he forgives us. Forgiveness of sins was God's plan from the start. We really don't ever need to talk him into that. He's trying to talk us into that.

And this old priest ends with poetry: *Because of the tender mercy of our God, the rising sun will come to us from heaven ⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.*

Angel to the Shepherds, Part One (Luke 2:8-12)

⁸ *And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."*

Shepherds are outsiders. Everyone else in this story has credentials. Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary are people devoted to God, and Simeon and Anna who we'll get to soon are people devoted to God. Shepherds are not family, and no word about devotion.

Furthermore, they are at the low end of the social scale. They spend their nights outside taking care of sheep. That's not very high on the employment scale. Now David also was a shepherd, and Bethlehem was his home town, so that also might be a part of this.

Mary gave birth to Jesus in a barn. She wrapped him in strips of cloth which means she did not have a baby blanket. The wrapping was unusual because it was not the usual way to wrap a newborn baby, not the proper way, just old pieces of cloth.

And a manger is not a cute little cradle that we see in the pictures. It's a big bin, with enough straw to feed a number of donkeys and horses.

Mary's speech was all about how the birth of Jesus would be good news for people in poor and humble circumstances, and this birth story is full of that.

And these shepherds get a message from an angel of the Lord, probably Gabriel again. And the message in v11 is: *Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.* A Savior has been born to you.

The shepherds are in this story. Everyone is in this story. We are in this story. The words are just as true and real here today in this place. This is what Christmas means.

Angel to Shepherds, Part Two (Luke 2:13-14) ¹³ *Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."*

These shepherds get a bigger show from God than anyone else. They got the message from Gabriel, just as Zechariah in the Temple, and Mary. But then they get to see and hear a huge angel choir praising God, not in the Temple, out in the field at night.

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to people on earth. We should probably understand "glory to God in the highest, *because he's bringing* peace to people on earth.

Zechariah's praise also ended with peace: *to guide our feet into the path of peace*. Z's peace was freedom from enemies, and serving God wholeheartedly. That's what this angel choir praises God for doing, that's what Jesus' birth signals.

Verse 14 ends, "On earth peace to those on whom his favour rests." A more literal translation would be "peace to humans he favours." That line can be read two ways.

One, "peace not to all humans, but only to those humans God favours." Or, "Peace to all humans who God now favours."

The translation sounds more like the first, that only favoured humans will get peace. But almost all commentators think the second is better, and for a couple reasons I sure they are right. That is, the angels are singing "peace to all humans whom God now favours."

Until now, the emphasis has been on Jesus for Israel, but here the word is not "Israel" or "the people" but "humans," *anthropos* in Greek. It is peace to all.

The next speech we'll read, old Simeon in the Temple, makes clear that Jesus is for "all the peoples" and "a light for revelation to the Gentiles." The angels give glory to God because God is now offering peace to all humans, all people.

And that is why every human can take for themselves the words of Gabriel to the shepherds: *That day in the town of David a Savior was born to you*. This is our story, too. Not everyone wants the Savior from David's town. But he's offered to everyone.

The shepherds hear and see this in a blaze of heavenly glory. I've been treating this like an announcement, and in some ways it is. But really it is praise. Angels were praising God, and the shepherds got to watch and listen to angels praise God for his gift to people.

Simeon in the Temple, Part One (Luke 2:25-32)

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

²⁹ *"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."*

This story is another witness to Jesus really being the one. In a sense, that is what all these speeches in Luke 1-2 give us: evidence from different witnesses that Jesus is the great Rescuer that God gave the world.

In a sense, all these stories are written for those who are not sure about Jesus. Is he the one? Luke puts these stories together and says, "Here's the evidence, here's what different people saw and said, you decide for yourself."

In the very beginning of Luke's Gospel he says that he investigated everything carefully from the beginning. He wrote what he found, to persuade skeptics and also so that those who followed Jesus would be confident.

The evidence here is that God had told a godly old man that he would see God's Messiah before he died. When Joseph and Mary took 8-day old Jesus to the Temple to be circumcised, God told this old man: "that child there is the one I told you you'd see."

So the first thing out of Simeon's mouth is that God has kept his promise to Simeon and that Simeon is now dismissed. His service to God on earth is over. "You may now dismiss your servant in peace." (There's "peace" again.)

Simeon saw clearly something else that no one so far has been entirely clear about: that Jesus is for the Gentiles: ³⁰ *For my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."*

God's salvation is in the sight of all nations, which means it is available to all nations. Jesus is a light for revelation to the Gentiles. Through Jesus, God is revealing himself, showing himself, to Gentiles.

A salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all nations. That's us. This is done in our sight. It is our story, too. To us a Savior was born.

Simeon in the Temple, Part Two (Luke 2:33-35)

³³ *The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."*

God showed Simeon two central truths about Jesus that no one else saw. The first I've already mentioned, that Jesus was for all the nations, God showing himself to Gentiles.

The second truth Simeon was the first to see comes in these private words to Joseph and Mary: that many in Israel would not want this Messiah, would not want this salvation.

The falling and rising of many in Israel. Mary talked about God bringing down the proud, the rulers, and the rich, and God lifting up the poor and humble. That's what Simeon can see.

People who are important are going to be brought down, because they will not receive this Rescuer; and humble people will become important and honoured, because they put their trust in this Rescuer.

A sign that will be spoken against. That's blunt. Jesus is himself a sign that God is working, and people in Israel will speak against this sign.

We know more of this story, and are used to this, but when Simeon spoke it had never crossed anyone's mind that when the Messiah came many Israelites would reject him.

And the thoughts of many will be revealed. Many who everyone else thinks are trusting in God will show that they are not interested in God's ways after all. People could not fake it when talking to Jesus. Their real response to God always came out.

And a sword will pierce your own soul too. The rejection of Jesus, which had many sides, would pierce Mary's own soul.

So the gospel brings good news to many people, and they praise God, but it also will bring conflict, because the gospel is not good news for everyone. Some who hate the gospel later turn to God, but not all. God showed Simeon a lot.

Jesus is Israel's Messiah, the Savior for Abraham's people. The good news means that God, in his tender mercy, now offers forgiveness from sins and now sends preachers to persuade people to turn to God and ask for forgiveness. Turning itself is a huge mercy.

Jesus is good news to the poor, the outsiders, those not devout and not godly, the losers. Jesus was born like one of them, and angel choir performed for a gang of them. God's Rescuer was born that day to them, and that day to us here also.

The Rescuer will not be appreciated by everyone. Some will speak against him, and he will get a mixed response. This will bring pain. But he is for all nations, which means us, and he shows to Gentiles like us what God is like.

Thankfulness is not the only proper response. 2:19 *Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.* 2:51 *His mother treasured up all these things in her heart.* This is also a good way to handle this story: treasure it up in your heart.

But giving thanks is also good. That's what usually happened in these stories. And since Christmas is just as much God story for us as God's story for them, we'll thank him too.