



table of contents

luke 1	2
luke 1. ⁵⁻⁷	2
luke 1. ²⁶⁻³⁰	4
luke 1. ⁴⁶⁻⁵⁶ — meditation 1	6
luke 1. ⁴⁶⁻⁵⁶ — meditation 2	7
luke 1. ⁶⁷⁻⁸⁰	9

Luke 1

Luke 1.⁵⁻⁷

⁵There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judæa, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. ⁶And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. ⁷And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.

In his first two introductory chapters, Luke lays out the message of his entire Gospel. He does so through eight narratives that examine the people and happenings surrounding Jesus' birth. He begins with a story about Zacharias and Elisabeth, whose names—God remembers and God promises—are symbolic. Their names inform us that God has made promises of salvation in the past and that now, in Jesus, God is remembering and accomplishing those promises.

Throughout his Gospel, Luke demonstrates that the world's natural mode of judgement is utterly flawed. What the world judges as impressive is shown to be low. What the world looks down upon, God highly prizes. While Luke heaps praise on the uprightness of Zachariah and Elisabeth, he also highlights their lowly status through his notice of barrenness. However unfair, in their culture, and in many others as well, to be barren, childless, is a stain upon the character of husband and wife.

In addition to showing the lowly status of a favored couple, Luke uses the couple's barrenness as a signal. We met several barren couples in the course of reading the Hebrew Bible. We think of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Elkanah and Hannah, and Manoah and his unnamed wife. In each case, the notice of barrenness was followed by a miraculous birth of a son (Issac, Jacob, Joseph, Samuel, Samson). Each son was born through the power and God, and each son accomplished some salvific work in Israel.

Through his notice of Zachariah and Elisabeth's barrenness, Luke signals, like a flashing neon sign, that we are to be on the look out. An amazing boy is about to appear on the scene. The boy will be an instrument in God's hands to bring salvation to Israel. He will be the forerunner of a second, much more impressive son. The first son will be unworthy to even act the part of a slave and undo the sandals of the second.

In addition, Luke signals that his story is one in which God will exert his power in the lives of individuals barren of the powers necessary to heal, change, and manage their lives.

In his preaching, Paul notes this theme of barrenness and references the example of Abraham and Sarah, who were promised a son but remained barren well into their "golden years." They might have given up hope. However,

"Being not weak in faith, [Abraham] considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara's womb: he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory [power] to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform."¹

¹ Romans 4.¹⁹⁻²¹

But, Paul's interest, like Luke's, is more than antiquarian. He draws out a spiritual lesson that is applicable to all of us.

“Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.”²

Just as the faithful couple was incapable of producing the promised child, and so was required to rely upon God alone for the fulfillment of the promise, so too, we are incapable of finding the right standing (justification) with God that we all so desperately desire and seek through our own, individual efforts. Like the ancient couple, we must not become so focused on our inabilities, or barrenness, that we lose hope and stop trusting in God's ability to make of us something we cannot make on our own.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 20, 2024)

² Romans 4.²³⁻²⁵

²⁶And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, ²⁷To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And the angel came in unto her, and said,

“Hail, thou that art highly favoured,
the Lord is with thee:
blessed art thou among women.”

²⁹And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. ³⁰And the angel said unto her,

“Fear not, Mary:
for thou hast found favour with God.

Mary, we are informed, “was confused at [Gabriel’s] utterance and wondered about what kind of greeting this could be.”¹ We could also translate that Mary “was confused at his utterance and wondered at how great this greeting was.” We might consider that it was the glorious majesty that surrounded the angel, Gabriel, that confused her and instilled her sense of wonder. Conditioned, perhaps, by accounts of angelic visitation such as Moroni’s visit to Joseph in which we are presented with a nighttime room that became “lighter than at noon” and a “personage” who hovered in the air and whose “robe [was] of most exquisite whiteness... beyond anything earthly,”² we might assume that Gabriel visited Mary in much the same way. Yet, scripture is replete with stories of “angels” who go unrecognized at the time of visitation and announcement. For example, two “angels” visited Lot in Sodom. Neither he nor the people of the city who were suspicious of them and thought to do them harm, seem to have recognized them as “angels”³ as we so often think of them.

Maybe Gabriel’s appearance was accompanied with an impressive display of glory. But, if so, the text does not mention it. Really, it is uncertain that Mary was even aware that she was in the presence of an angel. So, maybe it wasn’t a display of power and glory that confused and set Mary to wondering. If it wasn’t, what was it that confused and set her to wondering?

A careful reading of the text without preconceived notions suggests that perhaps it was the greeting itself. According to the KJV, Mary “was troubled *at his saying*,” or “confused *at his utterance*.” Further, “she wondered at *how great this greeting was*.” So, we must have another look at the greeting.

“Rejoice, O highly favored one!
The Lord is with you.”

So, what was it about the greeting that left her confused and wondering?

To Mary, I suggest, the greeting seemed too complimentary. Mary did not know this about herself. She did not feel this about herself. As her later response to her cousin’s, Elizabeth, warm and exalting greeting

¹ Author’s translation from verse 29

² See JSH 1. ³⁰⁻³¹

³ See Genesis 19. The KJV identifies them as “angels” in the first verse. Though the number of visitors is different, the same visitors who visited Lot in the 19th chapter, seem to have visited Abraham in the 18th chapter where they are simply described as “men”—the difference in number, perhaps, being the result of a different source.

shows, Mary thought and felt of herself as a woman of low status. Somehow, between her visit with Gabriel and Elizabeth, Mary had come to intuit the mission of the son she was carrying.

“He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away.”⁴

Mary’s son would not only change the way people felt about themselves but change their actual status. Mary, it seems, was his first patient. She was first to experience the miraculous transformation he brought into the lives of those he touched. And the initial intimation, the first inkling that she was more than she thought—that God thought more of her than she thought of herself—came with the angel’s exalted greeting. Here, in this greeting were her first intimations that she was not “lowly,” but was “favored,” and that she had the happy attention and attendance of that God who is holy; who is the Greatest of all.

Is it not a source of confusion and wonderment to find that one is far, far more than they imagine themselves to be? Is it not a source of confusion and wonderment to find that God is anxious and sincerely willing to be present in our lives? Is it not a source of confusion and wonderment to discover that through our relationship with Jesus, who “is not ashamed to call [us] brethren,”⁵ we find our potential, our favor, or blessedness, and our worthiness of the Divine presence.

Oh, but what wonderful confusion! What wonderful wonderment! And, as Mary discovered in the angel’s greeting and as she bears witness in her Magnificat, it is a confusion and wonderment that is open to us all.

Oh, yes, “it is wonderful, wonderful to me!”⁶

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 20, 2024)

⁴ Luke 1.⁵²⁻⁵³

⁵ Hebrew 2.¹¹

⁶ LDS Hymn #193, “I Stand All Amazed.”

- ⁴⁶And Mary said,
“My soul doth magnify the Lord,
⁴⁷And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
⁴⁸For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden:
for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
⁴⁹For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰And his mercy is on them that fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹He hath shewed strength with his arm;
he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
⁵²He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
⁵³He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away.
⁵⁴He hath holpen his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy;
⁵⁵As he spake to our fathers,
to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.”
⁵⁶And Mary abode with her about three months, and returned to her own house.

Since the American election of 2016, I have perhaps reflected and meditated on no scripture passage more than this one containing Mary’s Magnificat. If anyone, male or female, should ever be expected to understand and communicate the nature and meaning of Jesus, his life, and his ministry, what better candidate than his mother, Mary? God’s selection, lifting up, and magnifying of her—a “handmaiden” of “low estate—speaks volumes. And Mary knew it. So too did her Son, Jesus.

And they both knew that God was holy—someone unlike any other, completely out of the ordinary. They both knew and acted upon the revelation that the power of God was to be seen in his intention to invert the perverted manner in which this world estimated the value of individuals. He would cast the mighty from their thrones and enthrone those esteemed as lowly. He would feed the hungry to overflowing and let those previous rich scrounge for food. In all of this, God’s mercy would be manifested. We find ourselves rejoicing in such mercy and anxiously awaiting God’s inversion of a modern world gone mad.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 20, 2024)

- ⁴⁶And Mary said,
 “My soul doth magnify the Lord,
 ⁴⁷And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
 ⁴⁸For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden:
 for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
 ⁴⁹For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;
 and holy is his name.
 ⁵⁰And his mercy is on them that fear him
 from generation to generation.
 ⁵¹He hath shewed strength with his arm;
 he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
 ⁵²He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
 and exalted them of low degree.
 ⁵³He hath filled the hungry with good things;
 and the rich he hath sent empty away.
 ⁵⁴He hath holpen his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy;
 ⁵⁵As he spake to our fathers,
 to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.”
⁵⁶And Mary abode with her about three months, and returned to her own house.

I have commented on today’s text many times. Today’s *meditation* comprises the first in a series of sermons that we will entitle: “Jesus’ Heroic Reversals.” This series of sermons will focus on the Gospel of Luke, as he among the Gospel writers best epitomizes this theme. Or so it seems to me.

I might have named this series of *meditations*, “Jesus’ *Surprising* Reversals,” for they are, often, surprising. However, Jesus’ reversals as recorded by Luke are intended to do more than surprise. They are meant to challenge, resist, and reverse the world’s value system, especially as it weighs the worth of individuals. In challenging, resisting, and reversing the twisted value system, Jesus will surprise us by the individuals with whom he associates and the individuals whom he holds up as role models. He will also surprise us by being critical of those whom society looked to as heroes and role models.

I believe, in fact, that Jesus’ challenge to and reversal of the world’s value system belongs near the top of any list concerning the purpose and objective of his life, his teaching, and his ministry as a whole. Even more recognized and appreciated aspects of Jesus’ ministry—his healings, for example, or his teachings, or even his atoning sacrifice, death, and following resurrection, ascension, and enthronement—even these represent a challenge to and reversal of the world’s influences and values.

This certainly seems to be the view of his mother, Mary. In her famous Magnificat uttered in the presence of her cousin, Elisabeth, she makes no mention of the more traditional appreciations of her son’s ministry. Rather, in her Magnificat, Mary discerns that God will work through her son to reveal, challenge, and reverse the world’s distorted value systems.

“He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.

He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away.”

Mary’s Magnificat, then, could be thought of as a kind of Divine mission call or mission statement issued to Jesus through his mother. How often did Mary remind Jesus of the call and mission to which God had ordained him?

Mary, of course, could utilize her own experiences as evidence of God’s intent to bring about startling reversals. As the world judged things—and as she judged things under its influence—Mary had been a woman of “low estate.” But, much to her surprise, she had “found favour with God.” God reversed the way she would be thought of and remembered, as “all generations” would call her “blessed.”

Mary, then, entertained no doubts about her son’s ultimate success. Hence, she could speak as if he had already accomplished his mission of reversal. We note the past tense of her verbs.

He *hath put down* the mighty from their seats,
and *exalted* them of low degree.
He *hath filled* the hungry with good things;
and the rich he *hath sent empty away*.”

“The mighty” are not thrown down from their power merely as punishment for the crimes that brought them to such power. The “rich” are not “sent empty away” merely as punishment for having purchased their wealth through the exploitation of the poor. Such reversals would set the universe right-side-up. They would also serve as warning to all. “What you earthlings call power is not real power. What you falsely call power can be gone in the blink of an eye. What you deem as wealth is transitory and undependable. What is real is the evil means by which you gained your false power and wealth. That reality, that evil will follow you far after your power and wealth has vanished into nothingness.”

By the time Jesus has finished his life’s work of reversal, he will have turned the world upside down, topsy-turvy, and inside out. Those who might justifiably be thought of as heroes and role models will never look the same. In his kingdom, those who were thought first in the eyes of this world’s kingdoms will be last. In his kingdom, those who were thought last in the eyes of this world’s kingdoms will be first.

This may not be such good news for the high and mighty. But for the likes of Mary, this is glad tidings of great joy. Little wonder that she exalted,

“My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.”

Through Mary’s Magnificat, then, Luke has introduced one of his themes and one of Jesus’ principle objectives. Jesus intends to reveal the world’s twisted value system that devalues individuals and justifies the injustices that the “powerful” perpetrate against those that the world wickedly devalues. But he will do more than reveal those twisted values. He will serve those who have been devalued, thereby showing their true eternal worth, and challenging and reversing the world’s perverted values. Finally, he will let it be known that he expects those who would be his disciples to pick up his work of revelation and reversal.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(*edition: may 20, 2024*)

- ⁶⁷And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying,
⁶⁸Blessed be the Lord God of Israel;
for he hath visited and redeemed his people,
⁶⁹and hath raised up an horn of salvation
for us in the house of his servant David;
⁷⁰as he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets,
which have been since the world began:
⁷¹that we should be saved from our enemies,
and from the hand of all that hate us;
⁷²to perform the mercy promised to our fathers,
and to remember his holy covenant;
⁷³the oath which he sware to our father Abraham,
⁷⁴that he would grant unto us,
that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies
might serve him without fear,
⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him,
all the days of our life.
⁷⁶And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest:
for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord
to prepare his ways;
⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation unto his people
by the remission of their sins,
⁷⁸through the tender mercy of our God;
whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us,
⁷⁹to give light to them that sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.
⁸⁰And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing
unto Israel.

There is much unusual about the Baptist's rite of circumcision and the father's blessing that Zachariah pronounced upon him. First, the name, John. As the officiating priest commenced to name the boy after his father as was common and anticipated, Elisabeth corrected him, informing him that the boy was to be named, John. Those present for the rite "marveled all" at this unusual occurrence. Rather than being given a name celebrating and honoring his father or some other family member, the boy was to be given a name celebrating and honoring God, Himself: "God is merciful."

This focus on God rather than any mortal, including the boy over whom the blessing was pronounced, is also seen in his father's blessing. During a 200-word blessing, over three quarters is devoted to celebrating and honoring God and his labors in behalf of humankind, with less than 25% dedicated to the boy and the role he will play in God's plan of salvation. Of some dozen active verbs found in the blessing, all but one have God as the actor. God visits, redeems, raises up, speaks, performs, grants, saves, delivers, gives light, and guides, according to the KJV reading. John, on the other hand is passive in being "called," and then, as the sole verb given him, "gives knowledge." This unrelenting focus on God and His labors in the life of His people seems, as always, an appropriate, if an all-too-unusual focus.

Though the infant, John, surely did not comprehend his father's blessing at the time, he must have been taught it as he grew, both in word and example. For John the Baptist certainly learned this lesson well.

“This was he of whom I spake, ‘He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me.’”

“He confessed, and denied not; but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’”

“I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness.”

“He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.”¹

“He,” says John of Jesus, “must increase, but I,” John says of himself, “must decrease.”² So it is with all the Lord's prophets. They must all decrease as Jesus increases. They, like Moses, the prototypical prophet, and John are not to be compared to Jesus. They could and can do no more than present laws and commandments, give counsel, and offer recommendations—“For the law was given by Moses.”

“But grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.”³

That's a big, “but.” Prophets, even the greatest and latest of them, have not one ounce of saving grace to offer. Their trustworthiness and fidelity fall far, far short of that of Jesus. Paul recognized this, though the Corinthian saints did not. So, he reminded them through his own life and example that

“These things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and to Apollos for your sakes; that ye might learn in us not to think of men above that which is written...”⁴

“No flesh should glory in [God's] presence... according as it is written, ‘he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.’”⁵

Such understanding and priority is as uncommon as was John's blessing. We often become too enamored of the men and women around us. We forget, as the Psalmist rarely does, that God's “name alone is excellent.”⁶

Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

(edition: may 21, 2024)

¹ See John 1.^{15, 20, 23, 27}

² John 3.³⁰

³ John 1.¹⁷

⁴ 1 Corinthians 4.⁶

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1.^{29, 31}

⁶ Psalm 148.¹³