

Christmas Old & New

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[0 : 00] Today is the start of Advent, and so we always have an Advent series. This year we are going through Luke's gospel, because, yeah, in Matthew and Luke there's this wonderful stories of Jesus' birth, and just kind of Luke's gospel leading up to it.

So, yeah, that's exciting. In a moment, Julie's going to read for us. Very impressive with her fractured ankle. But let's pray together. Father, we do pray for Julie that she'll be healed soon, but pray for her as she comes up to read your word, and then later for me as I preach.

Please would you be speaking to us? Thank you that these words are yours, that you want to speak to each one of us in your love and your grace. So would each of us hear your voice, and do the work by your Spirit in each of our hearts today.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. The reading today is from Luke chapter 1, verses 1 to 25. You can read it in your bulletin, or it should be behind me for you to read up there.

Luke 1, 1 to 25. Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

[1 : 38] In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah, and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Now while he was serving as priest before God, when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of the incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

[2 : 57] And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

And Zechariah said to the angel, How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.

And the angel answered him, I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news.

And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.

[4 : 11] And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple, and he kept making signs to them and remained mute.

And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days, his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months, she kept herself hidden, saying, Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.

This is the word of the Lord. Great. Thank you, Judy. Let's keep that passage with us, as we're going to look at it together.

It's been very clear, right? Christmas is coming. Of course, we have this thing now here, but we've been selling Advent stuff for weeks, and even in the shops, right? As soon as Halloween is over, they put up the Christmas decorations, and start selling Christmas stuff.

Maybe you bought some presents yesterday, with Friday, with Black Friday. I don't know. Christmas is coming. And I don't know, Christmas is, it always feels very traditional for many of us, right?

[5 : 30] It's like Simon alluded to, we have these traditions, maybe in our family, that we do every year. Other countries have their own traditions, right? If you're German, there's the Weihnachtsmarkt, all these Christmas markets.

The British, they always have the same meal, with sprouts, and all the standard things. Yeah, maybe, I don't know, different countries have different traditions, but I don't know how you, even here in church, right?

It feels so nice and old, right? So comfortable with the tree, and the nativity scene, and we don't sing modern songs, but sometimes we sing these really old carols, from three, four hundred years ago, or O Come O Come Emmanuel, from, you know, eighth century.

It's like, wow, this is so old, right? So, traditional. And in a way, we like that, because it feels comfortable, maybe people like to come to church again, right?

Maybe people like it, when they come to a carol service, and it feels familiar. Now, I don't know what we should think about it, as Christians, right? Is it good that it's traditional, that it all goes back a long time?

[6 : 35] Or should we update Christmas? Should we make it more new, and modern, for Gen Z, and right? Should we, what should we do? Well, today is going to be a really helpful passage for that, as we look at Luke's Gospel.

Now, in a way, we're doing this for Christmas, but Luke didn't decide to write a Christmas book, right? This is a, he's writing a gospel, the gospel according to Luke, is volume one, Acts is volume two, and why did he write this?

Well, he wrote it for a guy called Theophilus, right? Verse three, as seems good to me, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely, for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus.

So, he's writing a nice orderly account, ahead of what happened, or what happened with Jesus, for Theophilus, who is, I think, some very rich guy, who is kind of paying him to, you know, not be a doctor, but be a historian, and write this gospel.

And why? Verse four, that you may have certainty, concerning the things you have been taught. He wants Theophilus, that to have certainty, confidence in the gospel, confidence in Jesus coming, in the salvation, confidence in this movement, right?

[7 : 55] Because, you know, it all looks so different, right? For Theophilus, you know, there's the Roman Empire, all these little Gentile churches, is this really from God? Is this the real thing?

And, yeah, this is the real thing. That's why Luke wrote Luke and Acts. So, that's what we're going to look at. And we want confidence. I mean, last week, we thought about that as well, right?

we're putting our trust in Jesus, but we can only do that if Jesus is reliable, right? It's only worth hoping in something, trusting in something, if it will happen.

And so, confidence is what we need. And that is what Luke wants to give us. And so, that's where we're going today, among others. Now, in a way, the story is, I guess, familiar.

It's not that difficult to understand, unlike maybe to Samuel, right? You know, here's Zechariah, a priest in a temple, and the angel Gabriel shows up and tells him that they're going to have a baby boy.

[8 : 52] Wonderful news. But, there's two themes that I wanted to highlight, that I think Luke wants to highlight. And the first thing is that Christmas is old.

Christmas is old, by which I mean it's not new. It's got a long history. It's got a long background. It's very old. Because Luke, you know, as he writes this, he wants to take us on a journey.

He takes us, well, back then, 70 years back. For us, like 2,000 years back. Right? To a different world. Thousands of kilometers away. To Jerusalem.

The atmosphere is really Old Testament. Verse 5. In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah, and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. It's a priest and his wife from the right family, and they're walking in the commandments of the Lord.

[9 : 55] It just feels very old, right? Even the writing style is very old. If you read this in Greek, then it's very clumsy. It's very wooden. It sounds exactly like the King James Version, basically, because that's what people were reading.

Their Old Testament was a very wooden translation. And so Luke really wants you to feel, hey, this is Old Testament. This is old. This is clunky, right?

Because that's where Jesus comes from. We go to a temple, a temple where for 1,500 years, that's been the heart of the Jewish life, where they're burning incense, with a priesthood going back all the way 1,500 years ago to Aaron, for us 3,500.

But that's where Jesus comes from, right? And it's not just the Jewish culture. Of course, this is God's history. And this is clearly about what God is going to do. Because, you know, where does the angel appear to Zechariah?

It's in the temple, as he is meeting with God. It's not like Zechariah is washing the dishes, and, you know, the angel shows up or something like that. This is in the temple. This is about God, and the relationship with his people, and, you know, the God who speaks and saves.

[11 : 10] And it's so clearly God's planning. I mean, we think, okay, Zechariah goes into the temple, you know, just another day. Apparently, there were about 18,000 priests around that time.

And, every division was on twice a year, which basically means, this only happens once in your life. This was the only time in his whole life that Zechariah actually went into the temple, on behalf of the nations, to offer incense.

And exactly at that time, here is the angel Gabriel, sent from God, with a message. And that message, the theme of the service, is about hope.

Because their relationship with God is about hope. And because we need hope. The whole Bible, in a way, is about hope. It's everything went wrong in the beginning, when Adam and Eve rejected God.

But God, well, would make things right. And the heart of that, the first thing, it was the promise to Abraham. Maybe you remember that from the beginning of the year, when we did an overview of the Bible.

[12 : 13] God promised to Abraham that he would make the world right. He would make everything right again. And he gave a sign. And that sign was, well, Abraham, you are going to have many descendants.

As many as the stars. which I think was quite hard for him to believe, right? Because he was 75 years old. And his wife was 65. And they didn't have kids yet. And how are they going to become this really massive family?

So many descendants. But God said, I will do a miracle. And indeed, 25 years later, when Sarah was 90, and Abraham was 100, yeah, they had a baby boy, Isaac, right?

A miracle. A symbol of new life. A symbol of hope. Right? Because that's what a baby represents. That's why barrenness is so hard.

Right? People who struggle to conceive. That can be so painful. Because it's, yeah, you want to produce life. And we are powerless. Right? That's how it feels. That's so sad.

[13 : 13] But in this barrenness, yeah, God says, I can bring life. And that's why he gave them a baby. And in a way, that's exactly what he's doing now. Right? Just to remind us of that promise here, we have another old couple.

They're probably in their late 50s, nearly 60, which was retirement age for priests. And, uh, they were barren. But God says, you are going to have a baby. Uh, a child, a child.

And, uh, yeah. In a way, a child that they were, well, more than any child. Right? I mean, it says, uh, it is what Zechariah was praying for. Right?

The angel starts, verse 13 with, uh, don't not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Now we hear that and we think, okay, they were praying for a baby.

My guess is late 50s, they had stopped praying for a baby. No, what have they just been praying for? Well, he is in the temple. He is offering incense. Right?

[14 : 12] Incense has to do with prayer. He was here in the temple praying for the nation. God, please save us. Please fulfill your promises. Right? You don't pray in the nation for personal stuff.

Imagine Sherman coming up here a moment ago and praying. And she says, oh, Lord, my foot hurts. Please heal me. And, uh, Simon has knee pain. And please help Esther to settle into her marriage. And, uh, we're going to travel with Christmas.

That'd be weird. Right? If you're up in front, you pray for the nation. You pray for the people. And that was what Zechariah was doing. He was praying for God to fulfill his promises.

And God sends an angel and says, your prayer has been heard. Right? salvation is coming. The fulfillment of the promise is here. And that, that, that, that is the feeling here.

Right? You will have a son, but not just for you. No, he will be a national figure who will bring the people back to God, back to the Lord, their God. But I hope you see the point, right?

[15 : 11] All of this is, is fulfillment. It's old. It's the old Testament of all these thousands of years coming to completion. Right? Christmas is a, God hasn't just shown up recently.

God has been at work in the world and coming down and speaking and promising and saving for ages. This is old. This is a, yeah, Christmas.

It's not new. It is, uh, yeah, it has a history. It has a track record. It has a very long CV. Right? That makes sense. I mean, we talk about the first coming of Jesus, right?

Christmas was the first coming. And in some ways that is true. Yeah? Because the incarnation was special because at this time God took on a human nature, right? And God walked around in a human body.

That was amazing. But it's not the first time that the son of God came to earth. The son of God has been to earth hundreds of times, right? He appeared to Abraham a couple of times and to Isaac, to Jacob and to Moses in the burning bush and a Mount Sinai.

[16 : 12] And later again with Moses on the Mount Sinai and to Joshua, et cetera. And in the desert, God had been there hundreds of times. And so when he says fulfillment is here, the son of God will come.

Well, we can trust it, right? We can believe it. It's because he's done it so often. Like a silly illustration, but we often have visitors here.

That's wonderful. If you're a visitor, you're very welcome. And you speak to them and they always say, well, see you next week. Actually, most of them don't come back because, you know, maybe they don't like the church or Ebenezer is too far.

And that's perfectly okay. You know, there's other good churches, no problem. But why do I know I'm not upset? Well, because they've only been here once. And so doesn't mean they'll come back.

But if Celeste would say, see you next week, I mean, she's been here for 12 years, right? Or more, more at 13 years, 14 years. Okay. So if she says, see you next week, I really know she'll be back because she has been here for so many years.

[17 : 16] She has been so committed and God has been so committed to these people. He's been so committed to his salvation plan. When he says, Jesus will come, he will come, right?

Because he's come so many times already. That's the feeling here. That's wonderful. And it's so different from some other religions, right? You know, you go to the bookshop and there's this section of new age books.

And every year there's someone, who shows up and says, okay, God appeared to me and he told me the truth. And I wrote a book about it. Please buy it. If you want to know the truth. And I always feel really, right?

If God cares so much about us, why didn't he do that earlier? Why did he only show up now and tell you this message? All right? I find it very hard to believe. Now, you need a bit of a track record, right?

And the fact that Christmas goes back in a way to the garden of Eden, right? All the way to the beginning. Always God has been speaking. God has been at work. It should give us confidence.

[18 : 17] If you're a visitor here, you're looking into Christianity. Was this just one guy with crazy ideas? No. It's got an incredibly long history. 2000 years.

And before that, Old Testament Judaism. And even before that, it's so reliable. Old Testament. And it's the same in a way for, that's why I like Christmas to feel old. Because, hey, this is not a new thing.

It's not something Watermark has invented to, you know, present the gospel. Christmas goes back so long. This is reliable. This is real. You can trust it.

We can trust this God. And it doesn't mean that everything that's old is true. There's lots of superstitions. And folk religions that, you know, go back for a long time.

Just because it's old doesn't mean it's true. But if it's not old, if it's brand new, and no one's heard it before, why would we trust it, right? Why would it be true? Now, you're trusting in something solid, and reliable, with a long history.

[19 : 18] And that's a wonderful thing. Yeah? It does mean we need to read the Old Testament. That is why we just went through Samuel. Because, that's the hundreds of times that God has come before, the coming of Jesus.

And we need to, we need that to have confidence. Now, in a way, that's encouraging. At the same time, Christmas is not just old, though.

Because when you read this, at the same time, Christmas is new. It's in line with everything that's come before, and yet, it's new. It's different.

It's a change from what came before. Of course, in a way, it's new. That's why the people were praying. That's why they were waiting, right? They didn't want things to stay the same way they were.

They wanted God to come and do, deal with the Romans and do something, right? They wanted something new. But, it's more than that. Because, yeah, this passage is the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist.

[20 : 18] And he has a job to do. So, look with me at verse 16. What will John do? And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

Now, you hear all that language of bringing people back, bringing, making people ready, making people prepared for the Lord, which kind of applies there currently not ready.

I mean, in a way, this is not, this is not new. This is fulfillment of the Old Testament. I mean, let's go to Malachi. Let's go to chapter four, the last verses of the last book of the last, the last chapter of the last book of the Old Testament.

Malachi four. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers.

[21 : 26] That is John the Baptist. He is this Elijah who will turn the fathers to the children, et cetera. Why fathers and children? Basically because family is kind of, it's the heart of society, right?

Where do people learn to love others? That starts when you're a child and you need to get on with your siblings. Where do you learn to obey? Well, you learn it when you obey your parents, right? When families are right, all of society will be right.

It's the idea. So at the heart of society, John will, this Elijah will sort out. But, but why is that important? Well, the rest of verse six, right?

Lest I come and strike the land with utter destruction. And there's going to be judgment and people need to get ready because they are rebels.

They are sinners. They need forgiveness. They need to turn. Otherwise, they will not stand in a judgment. And Jesus, the coming of the Messiah is not the salvation. It's also judgment.

- [22 : 26] And it can only be salvation if people repent. And the people aren't ready. They didn't, yeah, they deserve judgment. And so far, God has been, has overlooked it.
- So far, he's done not much about it. But that's going to change. This is the real thing. This is the fulfillment. This is different. This is new. And now they really need to be ready.
- And that is why in his love, God sends John to go and preach, right? To a prophet, to tell people to get ready. But that's very important.
- Christianity is old, but it's also new. Something dramatic and different has happened with Christmas. It's in line with the old, but it changed. And so we need to respond.
- It's not automatic. It wasn't for the Jews, like automatic. They needed to respond. I mean, we think of Jesus bringing us back to God, but here it says, John will bring people back to God.
- [23 : 25] Why? Because he will call people to respond. He will tell people to repent, to turn back. Right? Christmas is great. It's worth celebrating, but it's not automatic.
- You need to respond. And it's so easy to just think your background makes you okay. Right? All the Jews, they thought, well, we're ready. We're the Jews.
- But no, they were not. And that's why Christianity looked so different from before. Right? That's why you have all these churches with Gentiles, because they responded. And the Jews generally often did not respond in Jesus' time.
- I mean, you get that partly with Zechariah's response. Right? Because I don't know if you've noticed, this story sounded very similar to Mary in some way. And the next story, next week will be Mary.
- And again, here is someone, and the angel Gabriel shows up and talks about a baby boy going to be born. Right? Very similar story. But very similar, very different responses.
- [24 : 23] Right? Because we know Mary, and Mary gets told, she's a virgin, but she's going to give birth. And she says, well, I'm the Lord's servant. May it be according to your word.
- Yeah? Verse 45 says, blessed is she who has believed. But here's Zechariah. And the angel says, you're going to have a baby. And verse 18, how shall I know this?
- For I'm an old man, and my wife is advanced in years. Right? He doesn't believe it. That's what the angel says. Okay, you won't be able to speak for nine months, because you didn't believe it. Which in a way is a shock, right?
- Here is the priest. You know, he's nearly 60. He's been the priest for most of his life. He is in the temple, praying for the nation. And God says, your prayer is answered.
- And he says, I don't believe it. Right? That's, isn't it a shock? And here is the poor teenage girl. And she is told a similar, an even more difficult message. And she believes it.
- [25 : 22] It's a contrast, right? You need to respond. And you can be the priest. But if you don't respond well, well, you get a slap in the face, kind of, right?
- You can't speak for nine months, or worse. But that's the thing, right? You need to respond. And it doesn't matter whether you're the priest. It doesn't matter that you're from the family of Aaron.
- Right? Or for us, it doesn't matter that you come from a Christian family. It doesn't matter that you come to church all your life. It doesn't matter that your dad is a pastor, or whatever. It doesn't matter.
- Did you respond? That is what this passage says. We need to respond, right? God says, John the Baptist, because people need to respond. Christmas is new.
- We need to respond. And so, yeah, are you ready for Christmas? Which doesn't mean, are the presents in the post? No. Are we ready for Jesus coming? Have we responded to Jesus?

[26 : 20] And no matter who you are, yeah, have you responded? Tradition is not enough. You know, being comfortable in church is not enough. Have you responded to Jesus?

Have you, well, have you seen your needs? That's, well, there'll be utter destruction because of our sin. That's actually, we may not have committed big sins, but actually, we've been going our own way all our lives, and we're just not in relationship with God.

And wonderfully, Jesus wants us back. He died, he became a human being, so he could die on the cross to bring forgiveness to us, and that is ready for us to receive it.

But we need to ask for it. We need to turn away from our sin. We need to, well, repent, and come back to him, and start a new life with him, where we trust him, where we follow him, becoming a Christian.

That is what we need to do. And that is what this passage makes clear. Look, right at the start, yes, this is old, but we need to respond. It's not automatic. I hope we've done that.

[27 : 27] I hope you want to do that. If you want to know more, come and talk to me after the service. I'd love to help you respond. At the same time, most of us here, we have, right? We have responded.

We have turned from our sin. We're walking with Jesus. Well, here's another application that I think flows naturally out of that. How about getting others ready?

Not just us, but others too, because there's a whole world that is not ready to meet with Jesus, right? And they need to hear, and they need to turn. In a way, Jesus has a first coming and a second coming, and they are very similar, just that the first coming was to Israel, the second coming is to the whole world.

But in both cases, we have something very similar. But before the first coming, God sends a spirit-filled prophet, John, to warn people, to help them get ready.

Well, we get exactly the same thing in Acts, in volume two. What does Jesus do? Well, this is actually another Old Testament quote, right? In the last days, it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.

[28 : 40] We'll all be spirit-filled prophets. When? Well, again, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day, and it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

In his love, God sends spirit-filled prophets throughout the world to warn of the coming day of the Lord, so that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

It's exactly the same thing. And who is that? Well, yeah, that's us, right? Us Christians. God's given us the spirit to empower us to share the gospel so that people can be ready.

Christmas is great, but it's not automatic. People need to hear, and they need to hear it from us. So, I don't know, have you used these cards? Have you invited your friends to the Christmas day service?

It would be a great thing to do. Are you doing maybe something with your CG to get people together and introduce them to Christians? Are you, you know, there's an explore course coming up again in February.

[29 : 42] Let's make sure we share the gospel that people can hear, that people can respond, that people can be ready. That is, I think, a very natural application of this passage.

And then Christmas can indeed be joy to the world for everyone who responds. Why don't we pray for that? Amen. Our Father, thank you that this message is true and reliable.

Thank you that for thousands of years you've been at work in the world, and we know you will come again. You will send your son to make everything right. Father, help each of us to be ready for that, to surrender while we can, to turn to Jesus, to find new life, to find forgiveness, to find hope.

And Father, we want many people to hear that news this Christmas day. We want many people to come to hear and to have new life. We want to share this.

We want to see you save people. So please do that work. Use us as you want and would we see great fruit. Lord, in Jesus' name.

[31 : 02] Amen.