

LUKE 1-2

In these opening chapters, Luke tells of the Holy Spirit's invasion into the lives of an elderly couple (Zechariah and Elizabeth), a young Girl (Mary), lowly shepherds, an old man of prayer (Simeon), and a prophetess (Anna).

God's great plan to save the world is revealed to the most humble and lowly of God's people. The fact that women are recipients of this revelation equally with men also contributes to the message that God comes to the humble, not the proud and important according to the world's measure. With humility comes a greater openness, and both humility and openness are essential foundations of faith. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to raise simple, common lives into channels of God's majesty and grace.

Luke 1: 5-24

Zechariah experiences a divine visitation while he is in the temple, (the innermost section of the temple called "the Holy of holies"), fulfilling his duty as priest. An angel of the Lord appears (Gabriel) and tells him that he and his wife will have a child in their old age. The Holy Spirit will be involved in this. The child's role will be to prepare the way. He will have the spirit and power of Elijah (It was popular belief that Elijah, the first great prophet of Israel, would re-appear to proclaim the coming of the Messiah). Because Zechariah questions the possibility of this happening he is struck with muteness, until the child is actually born.

Luke 1: 26-38

The angel Gabriel then appears to Mary, a young teenager living in the northern Galilean town of Nazareth. Why is she chosen? Her response to the dream says it all: she was believing, receptive and accepting. She didn't know what it would all mean, but she was open, ready and willing to play her role, whatever it would be.

Luke 1: 39-56

Mary and Elizabeth (John's mother) are relatives. This means Jesus and John are cousins, something we only come to know in this gospel account. The relationship between John and Jesus starts even in conception, when John acknowledges Jesus, begins to bear witness and prepare the way.

Mary's song (the *Magnificat*) is beautiful. But it speaks as if God has already accomplished a reversal of fortunes where the rich and powerful will be dislodged from their tyrannous rule, and those who are destitute and down-trodden will be vindicated and refreshed. Perhaps it is intended to be read like the Lord's prayer: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Perhaps it is a glimpse of God's future invading the present. If the rich and powerful believed Mary's vision, they would change their ways in anticipation of God changing it in time.

Mary receives a prophetic vision not unlike Hannah in the Old Testament (the mother of the prophet/priest Samuel). God's plan for salvation will involve the reversal of fortunes. Those who are well off and powerful in an unjust world order will lose what they have, while those who are ground down and unjustly treated will be vindicated and comforted. Let us remember that this is a world where there are a few rich and the many poor with no middle-class. The rich make their money on the backs of the poor and they have to ignore vast human misery to hold on to their wealth. There is grave injustice here. Jesus' mission as messiah will involve a reversal of fortunes, which means judgment and condemnation for the rich and vindication and relief for the poor in God's kingdom. The question is: will God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, or will those who hold power by force reject God's kingdom way? We know how the story goes.

Mary's vision, like the prophetic visions in the Old Testament, does not distinguish between Jesus' first and second coming. In Jesus' first coming, the reversal of fortunes happens in the hearts of those who believe, not in a new world order. At the end of the current world order all will stand before the judgment seat of God. Only then will there be divine accountability. This is what the second coming is about.

Luke 1: 57-80

John is born, Zechariah receives his speech back, and he proclaims a beautiful prophecy about John and the messiah to come. It's about the salvation of the people of Israel. But will this be a political and military salvation or something else?

Luke 2: 1-20

Mary and Joseph make the trip to Bethlehem while Mary is pregnant. The reason is for taxation purposes. Bethlehem is Joseph's hometown, and it is the town of King David. The candidate for messiah must be of the lineage of David and Joseph serves that purpose as Jesus' official father.

Not only is Jesus born to poor parents and under impoverished circumstances, but the fact that God's revelation through angels comes to shepherds also reinforces the theme already articulated in Mary's song. God is working through the lowly, not the powerful, those who are humble and are looking for hope, not those who are self-satisfied, comfortable and not interested in changing the order of things. Shepherds are low-class workers, just the kind of people God chooses to fulfill the divine plan.

The shepherds, like Jesus' parents who have no money to get a good room in Bethlehem, come from poor stock. But this is whom God chooses to testify and shepherd the divine plan to save the world. The condemnation on the powers of the world is already given in these choices. For those in power, Jesus is simply a threat. There is no honest yearning for a messiah. The shepherds, Mary and Joseph, and even Simeon and Anna, represent a different Israel, those who are "looking for the redemption of Israel." (2:25) To such as these is the kingdom of God revealed.

LUKE 2: 21-52

2:21-24 – Whereas in Matthew's account, Joseph takes Mary and Jesus and flees to Egypt to escape Herod, in Luke's account the family remain in Bethlehem until the 8th day when they make the trip to the temple in Jerusalem, to have Jesus circumcised according to tradition. Joseph and Mary are good Jews and Jesus grows up a good Jew. Why is this important? Not only does it fulfill prophecy in that Jesus continues to be an eligible candidate for Messiah, but it accentuates the injustice of the religious authorities who will be against him. As we have already discerned from the *Magnificat* (1:46-55), God has chosen to side with humble, downtrodden Israel, over against the powerful and wealthy (which include religious authorities who are sold to the greed and power of Rome). They care to retain their own control and privilege rather than be committed to justice and compassion. The religious authorities are supposed to steward the faith entrusted to them not use it as a hammer to keep the people down through guilt, shame and the threat of eternal damnation.

2:25-35 – Simeon, like Mary and Joseph, also represents humble Israel. His hope and prayers are for the 'consolation of Israel'. Simeon recognizes in Jesus God's promise of deliverance and we are told it is the Holy Spirit that gives him the insight to recognize Jesus as the Christ (Messiah). He offers his poetic prophecy (known as the '*Benedictus*' in Christian tradition) which speaks of hope to be fulfilled in Jesus. This hope is not just for Israel but for the whole world. Luke is interested in those aspects of the story of Jesus that point to universal fulfillment beyond the Jewish nation. Clearly this gospel is aimed at a gentile audience.

But Simeon also offers more words to Mary in vs 33ff. He speaks about the trouble and opposition Jesus will face and how all this will cause pain in Mary's heart. Clearly this gospel account is taking care to tell the story from Mary's point of view.

2: 36-38 – Anna is named as another devout, humble Jew, a prophetess. She also recognizes in Jesus God's salvation and deliverance, and she begins to tell others about him.

2:39-40 – The family return to their home in Nazareth and Jesus grows up a good Jewish boy.

2: 41-52 – Here we encounter Jesus as a 12-year-old boy as he comes with his parents to Jerusalem and the temple during some religious festival. He gets so immersed in discussion with religious teachers in the temple that his parents forget about him and begin their trip back north to Nazareth without him. They are probably part of a convoy of travelers and so it would be easy to miss Jesus. They return to find him still in the temple. Why is this story here? Clearly, Jesus' rebuke of his parents, even at 12, that he must be 'in his Father's house', already foreshadows his self-understanding as being connected with God in a personal and unique way. It could be interpreted as an arrogant and inconsiderate statement to his parents who are rightly concerned about his welfare, unless, of course, he is that unique and special someone like no other human.