Christmas In the Gospels: Luke 1 – The Set-Up

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Pastor Dave Peters

I used to work at a BMW dealership as a valet driver.

Which sounds impressive

until people ask how many cars I sold…

or how to fix their engine.

Let me be clear:

I was a driver.

Point A to Point B.

Park it.

Walk back.

Repeat.

You do that a few hundred times a day, something dangerous happens —

you stop thinking.

You go on autopilot.

And autopilot is great…

until it isn't.

Because in this BMW dealership, there's this one corner.

It's tight.

It's blind.

And cars are constantly coming in and out.

Everyone knows it’s dangerous.

Everyone slows down.

Except… autopilot doesn’t.

This particular day, I’m driving a BMW Z4.

Low car. Fast car. Quiet car.

I’m tired.

I’m just trying to get to the end of my shift.

My brain is already clocked out.

I come toward the corner.

No brakes.

No hesitation.

And as I turn—

But first,

I need to confess something.

I really hate confrontation and tension

Not even big arguments — just mild social tension.

My buddy Jon and I were at the grocery store.

We ordered two steamed lobsters.

We wait an hour, thinking it’s one price.

Turns out — it’s almost three times what we expected.

Now the way this store works:

You get the lobsters in the back…

Then you walk to the front to pay

A responsible adult would say,

“Hey, sorry, that’s more than we thought.”

As a responsible person in my mid-30s

I did the honourable thing

And I hid around the corner.

As, I sent Jon to the information desk to return the lobsters.

I prayed quietly for his safe return.

When he was done, we walked out fast.

And church…

that is how I absolutely nailed adulthood.

In our lives we can watch and feel life passing

but find ourselves waiting for what is next in an uncomfortable tension

Tension can show itself in many ways

It can show up like

I believe God is good, but I don’t understand what He is doing right now.

Knowing Christian answers, but it feels like silence.

A lot of activity, like a hamster on a wheel opposed to a person with purpose.

Ancient Israel finds itself in a place of both waiting for things to get better and uncomfortable tension.

This tension is what leads up and is the focus of Luke 1

Our Sermon series is Christmas in the Gospels as we explore the Christmas story from the gospels

Prior to Luke 1 is a long series of defeats and captivity under foreign powers,

God's people were living in their land but under the crushing weight of the Roman empire.

Rome had brought world peace through conquest,

but it was with a heavy toll of taxes,

armies of mercenaries,

slavery,

and bringing misery to the lands they occupied.

People struggle to live and kept on living by habit long after they have lost all sense of purpose or meaning in life.

As those who are under oppression, Israel is waiting and longing, in fact 400 years of waiting for God to speak since the last Old Testament book of Malachi.

An uncomfortable tension both in physical and heart for freedom, relief, and direction.

We recently had an intentional service called Blue Christmas this last Thursday, it's a place where we can recognize holidays are not always full of love and joy, that suffering is a real and present thing.

Thank you to the Chans and others who helped bring it together.

It helped recognize that feelings of love can sometimes feel out of reach and this is not a bad place, this is a real place we navigate as people or as nations.

In Luke 1 something unique was about to happen in an insignificant province of Israel in Rome's wide-spread empire.

The birth of two babies, one as a forerunner and set up to the other who is greater.

Luke is setting up a Desperate Expectation for us as he weaves the parallel story of these two babies' birth.

God is showing and revealing his love for humanity in an period uncomfortable tension.

The birth of John the Baptist is the focus of Chapter 1, along with the pregnancy of Mary.

Open your bible to Luke 1 as we navigate through it leading to the Birth of John.

I'm thankful to comedian Michael Jr. as we take his framework over Luke 1

He mentions, a good joke has a set-up, a punchline, and a result.

The Set-Up –the setting in place

The Punchline – the point of it all as delivered

The Result– the finished resolution

Back to the set-up

Luke opens with an elderly couple, the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth.

Zechariah is a godly priest but when he is faced with the supernatural, he mentally runs away and hides around the corner.

An angel appears to him in the temple while he is doing his sacred duty and declares a son will be born to him to be named John.

A prophet of the Most High.

What should be an example of humility and acceptance, is a show of unbelief.

This faithful priest, turns fearful in v.12 NIV

12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

To faithless in v.18 NIV

Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

How can I be sure?

Zechariah doubt is based on his understanding of nature,

what the angel says does not work

with his greater faith of how he understands the world to work.

I wonder how much we miss out on what God is doing because we want to act according to our rules.

For a priest, whose entire role is the navigate the supernatural and natural to bridge understanding and life, this is a profound failure.

For his faithless and careless words, Zechariah is struck to be a mute and Elizabeth later becomes pregnant.

This uncomfortable tensions of how even the priests can be faithless and careless is not missed

The story is contrasted with.

Elizabeths younger cousin, the virgin Mary also receives a visit from the same angel, Gabriel.

Luke 1:31-32 NIV

31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High…

The coming Messiah will come and establish his throne and what is a overwhelming experience for Mary is met with an attitude of humility and acceptance.

v.38 (NIV) I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."

Same promise, a child will come who is unlike any other child before.

Zechariah the priest, who should by all of societies expectations should take the news well, fails.

Mary, a marginalized young, unmarried women who by all society's expectations should fail, gets everything right.

A lot of young people or those who feel marginalized do this thing, they wait for the expert or the powerful to come figure it out.

Mary, doesn't wait she figures it out now, and she figured out faith.

But that's a different sermon for another season.

This is followed by a time of joy of meeting between Mary and Elizabeth

And a song of worship by Mary as read today by the Leung family earlier in our service

All this set up brings us to the birth of Elizabeth's baby.

The punchline or the point of Luke 1 starts with the story of John but it

is left with a mystery

Up to this point in the story to Luke 1:57

Zechariah has been mute

Luke 1:57-66 NIV

57 When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son.

58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah,

60 but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.”

In Israel the circumcision is one of the main milestones for the blessing and welcoming into Israel, usually the name is already established making an uncomfortable tension

The act of naming a child was a demonstration of parental authority over the child.

But in a few isolated incidents, God reserved that right for himself.

On those rare occasions God said, ‘I will name the child, because this child is under my authority and related to me in an extraordinary way

In Luke 1, we see God decreeing two names as His.

John and Jesus

Both are of the same mission from God even before they are born.

But they hold different roles in that mission

The names reveal this:

John is the Prophet of the Most High his name meaning “God has been gracious”

John represents Israels past and its hope,

Grace in a time of uncomfortable tension.

Jesus is the Son of the Most High his name meaning “Yahweh Saves”

Jesus is the hope and future, not only for Israel but for everyone, the highest name of God, Saves.

But the crowd doesn’t get this, instead they see the uncomfortable tension of the baby not named according to their expectations.

61 They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”

The frustration that happens is for whatever reason the crowd doesn't care about Elizabeth's word, they want customs first.

It is customary to name a child after their father or grandfather,

Elizabeth has knowledge that the boy is to be named John, but due to blindness and ignorance the crowd appeals to his father.

62 Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child.

63 He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John."

64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God.

Zechariahs recovered his speech.

Unbelief closed his mouth, and belief opened it again:

He believes, therefore he speaks.

His first use is not to utter a complaint, but a doxology a praise: a proof that the cure had taken place in his soul in a time of silence

Israel has been in a time of silence, with the gap of 400 years.

This silence isn't that God was lost, but no new revelations appeared to the people of Israel.

Life continues, events happen, children grow up, milestone covered, bills are paid, hopefully.

But all this set up, and now we wait for the breakthrough or the punchline.

In Luke 1, we get some of that breakthrough

65 All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. (NIV)

Awe and fear are the emotions felt and I love how John Calvin puts the works of God

"God does not amuse us with his miracles, but arouses the senses of men, which he perceives to be in a dormant state"

God is calling us to trust him, not only when he shows us miracles but especially when we are dormant.

God is waking people up but it is not complete

66 Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?…

All the events that have happened is left with a drumroll, a set up.

The two miraculous pregnancies, Zechariah’s muteness, and his healing.

The question is left in the same place that Israel and we are left.

“What then is this child going to be?…

What then?

We have been going through our entire life, maybe watching the news, and facing frustrating things.

The world of the New Testament is a world very much like ours.

There were wars.

There was sickness.

There was poverty and injustice.

There were people who struggled to keep on living, living by habit long after they had lost any sense of purpose, meaning, or goal.

It was a world like ours, populated with people like ours.

But God had made preparations, he started the set-up

God was about to burst into this world to reveal his love.

Listen to the words of Zechariah in Luke 1:76-79

76 And you, my child (John), will be called a prophet of the Most High;

for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

Him, Jesus was about to be born, and after His birth our world, despite all its poverty and injustice, wars and terrorists, has never been the same.

77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation

through the forgiveness of their sins,

For Israel and for all of humanity, God has been setting things up

Prophets, priests, angels, and babies have all been moving into position

To reveal the love of God

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."

God is about to deliver himself, to shine his light into the darkness, to guide.

But the guide, the Son of the Most High, is not yet here in Luke 1.

Our set-up is our whole life, our talents, our resources, and our opportunities.

Adding new houses,

preparing for college,

getting degrees,

getting married,

figuring out your finances,

planning and waiting for Christmas season to come and go,

it's all set-up.

Your punchline is about what you're called to deliver.

A lot of us may know we are living life, but we aren't sure, yet what that means.

Because to know your setup and not your punchline is an uncomfortable place to live.

Let me give you an example.

How many of you are still thinking about what happened to that BMW at the beginning of the message?

All you have is the setup; you don't have the punchline.

Yet, we've moved on and allowed ourselves to continue like there wasn't something missing.

Luke 1 and ancient Israel, and maybe even our lives are left living in this uncomfortable place.

All this set up, but what's the point.

The Messiah is not here, the path is not clear, and Israel is still floundering.

The story and birth of John the Baptist is the setup—good, necessary, God-given.

But he is not the point.

We want the story to wrap up, to know the ending and move on.

To know the setup and not the punchline is an uncomfortable place to live.

Luke wants us to feel that same tension Israel lived with

a confusing tension in a broken world that looks a lot like our own.

If this is what God does in the setup—

miracles of mouths being opened and closed,

angels appearing,

400 years of silence being broken,

babies being miraculously conceived—

then imagine what He is preparing to reveal as the true story.

Imagine who He is planning to reveal to us.

We don't actually have to imagine.

We know—it's Jesus.

But knowing about Jesus and walking with Jesus are two very different things.

Jesus is the point, and He calls you to something much deeper than simply going through the motions of church, work, or family life.

To know Jesus

is good.

But to walk with Jesus

and allow Him to shape and inform your purpose

is greater.

The child, the Son of God, is coming.

And what a revelation He will be.

The result is Jesus in our world and our heart shaping us

I look forward to seeing you on Christmas Eve.

And more than that, I look forward to seeing Jesus be the one who reveals our purpose and relieves the tension of this unfinished story as we journey on our way

Whether this is your first encounter

or simply the next setup.

As Michael Jr. says,

“But what are you going to aim for? Everyone has a setup, and everyone has a punchline. You need to find your punchline and deliver it.”

Luke’s opening chapter forces us to confront this truth:

your life has purpose,

your setup has intentionality,

and now the question is—what will you aim at?

As we enter the Christmas season, many of us feel tension—

between hope and disappointment,

joy and weariness,

faith and unanswered questions.

Instead of ignoring that tension, name it.

Luke shows us that God meets people in their waiting, not after it’s resolved.

Take one step toward Jesus this week.

Not a perfect step

just an honest one.

Bring Him your tension, your questions, your weariness.

Step into community of faith and stay

Aim your life toward Jesus, and trust Him to meet you there.

That’s the invitation of Christmas.

That’s the invitation of love in uncomfortable tension

Prayer

Benediction