

Part 3: The Melody of Good News

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Last week, as we continued our series in Luke, we began a story unique to Luke's gospel--the story of God beginning to move again by sending an angel to an old man, with a barren wife, of a restless people to announce good news.

We spent last week looking at the context into which the gospel of Luke begins, but today we are going to examine the content of the first gospel message in the book of Luke. Today Gabriel the angel is going to gospel to us, he is going to announce good news to those who need it.

But the good news which Gabriel is going to share today is not the typical good news we would think of when we think about the gospel. There is no mention of the cross, no mention of Jesus Christ, in fact the main human actor in this passage is not Jesus of Nazareth, but instead his cousin, John the Baptist. Yet, it's the prophecy of the birth of John the Baptist, to the old man Zechariah and his barren wife Elizabeth that fills them, and the whole people of God with great joy.

If you've ever been to a play or an opera you have heard what composers call, "the overture." The overture is the song the orchestra plays sometimes before the first characters even step onto the stage. The role of the overture is to begin to familiarize the audience with the key tunes, sounds and melodies which will later be developed over the course of the performance.

It's not necessarily a blatant mash up of those songs which would follow, but in subtle ways, through chords and key changes, it begins to inform us of the melodies which are to follow so that when we hear those powerful songs later on in the story, we were prepared for them.

The story and message of Gabriel and Zechariah and Elizabeth form the overture of Luke's gospel. What God began to do in the lives and hearts of these people this morning not only reached all the way back into God's Old Testament promises, but it reaches all the way forward leading us to the end of the gospel itself.

So that is what we are going to look at today as we see the role of John the Baptist and the responses of his parents. **What we are going to see today are four melodies of the gospel**, four ideas Luke consistently brings back in this book which should shape what we expect and how we should understand the call of salvation in Jesus Christ. Those melodies are going to be **joy, conversion, unbelief, and mercy**.

We will begin today by reading our first scene inside the temple, **Luke 1:8-17**.

So here we see Zechariah enter the temple and much to his surprise, after 400 years of silence God began to speak anew by the mouth of an angel and Zechariah is filled with fear.

Zechariah here encountered an angel who merely reflected the glory of God and he was terrified. When we encounter the majesty of the Triune God of scripture we too would be terrified if that same God would not turn to us and comfort us.

I love how the angel here acknowledges Zechariah's experience and speaks to him: "Do not fear." I imagine that the angel practiced this response because he had seen this marvelous compassion throughout eternity modeled by God himself.

Remember how David speaks of the Lord in **Psalms 103:13-14**. What a wonderful truth for us to consider as we encounter the message of the Lord's salvation that this God, the creator of the universe, knows you when he comes into your life. While he doesn't promise the absence of fear, he does promise to show kindness and compassion to those who fear him with faith. It is not the absence of fear but the presence of faith which is the believer's greatest comfort in this life.

It's in light of the character of the Lord that we encounter the first melody of his gospel: **Joy**.

Look again at **Luke 1:13-14**.

I saw the other day a young boy who had cancer go to an event hoping to see one of his favorite sports stars. As everyone was leaving, the boy was unnoticed as he stood among the crowd and he began to cry. But hearing the cry, the figure turned around, saw him, and went over to him. The joy that came over that boy's face, and the face of his family was nothing short of astounding.

When you are noticed by the King of Kings, in the midst of your own longings and weaknesses, there is only one proper response: joy.

To be heard, to be known by a God as good as this God, is to turn seasons of sorrow and apathy into joy. When you understand who it is who notices you in the gospel, and how low this savior stoops to take you by the hand, all we are left with is joy.

And here, Zechariah's prayer had been heard and it was being answered. God noticed him.

Now what's interesting here is that we aren't really sure what Zechariah's prayer was. Some think that his prayer was for the redemption of Israel, for the coming of God's kingdom. These prayers were the kind of prayers that a priest would normally offer as they burned incense on the altar in the Holy Place where Zechariah now stood.

In fact weighted upon their chest was an ephod, which was basically a breastplate, and upon the ephod were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. So that the weight which would have been upon the chest of any priest was the weight of all Israel as they stood before God himself.

Yet, what the angel announces is the birth of a son, a miraculous conception. However if this was his prayer, why then would Zechariah respond with the unbelief he responds with later in this text.

I think that perhaps by answering the singular prayer which Zechariah offered, God answered it in a way that far exceeded his expectations of both desires. God wasn't just going to open the womb, but he was going to answer Israel's longing. God wasn't simply going to answer Israel's longing, but he was going to care for this afflicted Israelite family.

God's promises are always bigger than our petitions.

We see this here because the joy and rejoicing which Zechariah and Elizabeth were to have was to be shared with the many. Whatever God was doing in the life of these two faithful worshippers was not only going to bring them personal joy, but there was an overflowing corporate joy which would follow.

When God works he brings joy. Now I want to give a brief aside here: this joy wasn't immediate joy was it? In the moment Zechariah was fearful, later on he will be doubtful, for a season he is going to be afflicted, but by the end of Zechariah's story he is jubilant. The promise of God's joy is not the absence of other difficult emotions but it is the promise that joy will always be our final note and lasting privilege.

Luke wants us to see the joy this gospel brings to us. More than any other gospel writer Luke speaks of joy and rejoicing. In fact here in verse 14 and later on in verse 44, Luke uses a word unique to him which expresses exultant joy. It's a word which carries with it a piercing exclamation. My youngest daughter has this right now, when she finds something delightful, she gives the sharpest and shrillest scream. She does it not to be annoying, she does it because she is so incredibly joyful.

When you think of what God has promised to do for you in the message of salvation in Jesus Christ, do you think of joy? Do you think of squealing like a two year old who just got a bowl of ice cream? Because if you don't it's my hope that God's joy will overtake you as you begin to see the wonderful good news of this gospel.

But, to those who feel that joy is hard to come by, we must also consider the other melodies in this text. Because the joy which people have here in this text is not merely connected to something superficial, it is connected to the promise of God. Why will these people be joyful? Because of the role this child will play in bringing God's promised salvation.

Read with me: **Luke 1:14-17.**

Here we see the reason for joy as we examine our second melody this morning: **Conversion.** John the Baptist would come as a messenger of the need and promise of conversion to the Lord our God. The joy we have in the gospel is because of the turning of our hearts towards gospel.

Many Christians have a tendency to view John the Baptist the same way the Pharisees did. We know he did something, and fulfilled some role, but he's kind of just that weird guy who eats bugs and runs around in the woods.

But let us not mistake that John is said to be great before the Lord. Jesus says later on the book of Luke that among those born by men there is none like John the Baptist.

He was great for two reasons, one had to do with his distinction, and the other had to do with the distinct role of his ministry.

First, John himself was distinct. He was not to take alcohol but instead we was to be filled with the Holy Spirit even in the womb. This is distinct. Historically God's prophets were filled with the Holy Spirit for a specific task, and once that task was completed the Holy Spirit would no longer dwell on them in such a distinct way.

Jesus when he was born was going to have a unique filling of the Holy Spirit unlike any man had had before, including John.

Those who come to faith in Jesus Christ, those who confess their sins, repent and turn to the Lord are filled with the Holy Spirit as a comforter, encourager, and empowerer the moment they are saved.

But here John is uniquely filled with the Holy Spirit at his conception. This task which John was about to play was unique because he was the prophet who would not only proclaim the message of salvation, but would actually see it unfolding before his eyes.

He was not going to be under the control of alcohol, but under the control entirely of the Holy Spirit. John embodied what Paul spoke of in Ephesians 5 when he says, "Do not be filled with wine, but be filled with the Spirit."

But this unique and distinct John was sent for a unique and distinct purpose. That purpose was to create a distinct people. Read with me again: **Luke 1:16-17**.

John was going to come in the spirit and power of Elijah. This is important because remember what we read last week? Remember the final promise God gave his people before he was seemingly silent for 400 years? When Gabriel said these words to Zechariah it would have hit his ears like fireworks because of **Malachi 4:5-6**.

The forerunner to this great day of the Lord, the time when God would rescue the righteous, would be that Elijah would come back and here is the one who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah.

Elijah played an important role in the Old Testament in the peak of Israel's idolatry. On Mount Carmel he faced off with 450 prophets of Ba'al before all the people of Israel and asked God to perform a miracle. What was his goal in this miracle? Look at **1 Kings 18:36-39**.

The role of Elijah was to turn men's hearts back to God. What was the role of John the Baptist in verse 16? To turn the hearts of many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

Just as Elijah did, John came as God's converter. He came to convert people from one way of life to another. And he would do so by going before *him* (verse 17). Who is *him*? He is the Lord.

John the Baptist was to turn people's hearts back to God by going before the Lord. That is he was to prepare people for Jesus by going before Jesus, by proclaiming what this conversion would look like.

John the Baptist was a minister of the gospel. He didn't convert anyone. He didn't save anyone, because he wasn't the messiah. But his job was to prepare people for the messiah by telling them what the Messiah would expect.

Just as ministers of the gospel do today, we point people and prepare people for what a response to this salvation would be. What does it take to rightly come to Jesus? What does a prepared heart look like? It turns towards God. You see confession doesn't require a heart change. But conversion does. Christian confession includes Christian conversion. Coming to Jesus is not an affirmation of the mouth, or merely an agreement of the mind, it is a turning of the whole heart to God.

John was coming to a people who knew the Old Testament Law, they went to the temple, they kept the feasts. But the sign and symbol of this good news is merely an external conversion, but a conversion from the heart. We cannot come to God unless we lead with our heart.

But how can we tell if a heart is turned? The angel here helps us out by showing us what a heart turned towards the Lord actually looks like. Gabriel says it looks like two things: Turning towards each other, and turning towards obedience.

Look again at **Luke 1:17**.

What does it look like to be a people prepared? What does conversion look like? What does turning to God entail? It looks like relational reconciliation to each other, and it looks like obedient reconciliation to God. It turns towards each other, by turning towards the wisdom of the just. To turn with our heart means the whole body follows.

We will see this time and time again in the gospel of Luke, people who turn to the Lord in obedience are people who turn towards others. In our day and age this will make both sides of the political aisle uncomfortable. We see in here the expectation that those who turn to the Lord are compelled to turn towards others. But we also see that if we are to fully turn towards others we are to move out of disobedience and into the wisdom of God.

The gospel calls us to others, and to obey to the Lord. Where do these markers of conversion show up in your own life? Part of the joy of this message is the joyful labor of love and obedience. John's goal is to prepare his people for this, but if you come to Jesus you are not only prepared for this, but you are empowered for this through the Holy Spirit. Look at what Paul says in **2 Thessalonians 1:11-12**.

The power of the gospel, allows us to glorify God and his wisdom empowers us for every good work through his Holy Spirit. The message of the gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ is a message of conversion. John's ministry is going to call people to turn away from the idols of the world and to Jesus Christ.

But as good as the joy of conversion to God seems, we have a third melody buried in this text. Look at Zechariah's response: **Luke 1:18-22**.

Here we see the third melody of the book of Luke: **Unbelief**.

Throughout the book of Luke, wherever the gospel is proclaimed, there are some who believe, and some who don't. The lines of this are blurred even more because sometimes it's the bad guys who disbelieve and are trying to put Jesus to death, sometimes it's those who love God but haven't yet seen Jesus as God himself, and sometimes it's Jesus' closest disciples who wrestle with belief.

But what we see in this text are two issues which help frame our understanding of faith and doubt.

First we see that the gospel comes as an authority into our lives. Here we have Zechariah who is witnessing a miraculous event which no one has seen in over 400 years, shaking with fear, hearing the message of the angel and then he has the nerve to say: "How can I know this?"

The response of the angel is almost comical: "Do you know who I am? I am Gabriel and I stand in the presence of God and I was sent to bring you this good news!"

The message of the gospel is a message with divine authority. To not heed this message, to not believe it, to think we can have a knowledge more certain than knowledge God reveals to us in his word is to commit cosmic treasons.

Which means a rejection of this gospel demands and deserves punishment.

The irony is that Zechariah wants a sign, but by the end he doesn't want the sign he was given. The sign Gabriel gives that this will happen is that he will be mute.

The theme of signs comes back later in the gospel of Luke as many people are demanding signs from Jesus that he is the messiah. But Jesus message to them is that he is the sign. There can be no greater sign from God apart from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This means there are two signs you can look at: Jesus' cross or your condemnation. One is for this life, one is for the next. But at the end of the story, everyone believes. My hope is that you look upon the cross of Jesus where he took your sin, and your punishment for unbelief, and rose from the dead so that you might have new life in him.

For those who wrestle with faith and doubt, it's this sign which helps us make sense of our own experience. Because not only is the gospel our authority, but second, the gospel is also our healing. We will all wrestle with aspects of unbelief, that's the root of sin. But it's only those who wrestle in light of the cross where our unbelief can be put to death day by day.

The greatest problem which remains in this story is not what we might think. You might think that if you were struggling with barrenness and God healed it that you would believe. You might think that if you were finally able to find the satisfaction you wanted, the spouse you desired or the degree you needed you will finally be content.

But here in the story of Zechariah is the proof that our greatest problem in life is not our external circumstances, but our internal disposition towards unbelief. But here, under the firm but gentle touch of the Lord's messenger, unbelief was being overcome.

Jesus came so that we can continually wage war against our unbelief by seeing God faithful even when his faithfulness seems difficult. There are two groups of people in the gospel of Luke, those who follow and are saved by Jesus, and those who are not: both groups suffer from unbelief at various times. But one group, is a group who continues to trust and follow Jesus even when it seems like foolishness to their flesh.

One of my favorite stories in Luke is the story of Zechariah at the birth of John when his lips are finally opened. If you're one who wrestles with seasons of doubt and unbelief, I can't wait for Zechariah to encourage you by showing that those who endure in faith rejoice at the certainty of it.

The gospel doesn't create in us unbelief. That already lives in our hearts. But it's only the gospel which takes those who wrestle, and brings them into the security of meaningful, enduring faith.

Our last melody is encountered in our concluding verses this morning: **Luke 1:23-25**.

Here we see the final melody: **Mercy**.

God in his mercy didn't just cause Elizabeth to conceive, but in doing that he took away her reproach. Remember, as we talked about last week, it was considered God's displeasure that one would be childless.

Despite Elizabeth's faithfulness, she was plagued with a constant fear in her heart always questioning if she was actually good enough, faithful enough, righteous enough. But in her conception that reproach before men was removed.

Now what is powerful here in this text is that despite the removal of this reproach, she stayed hidden. No one is really sure why, but I think it's because the relief of knowing that God was not displeased with her was so profound that she really didn't care what other people thought. She didn't go out and start showing her baby bump to everyone as a sign of her vindication, because she was vindicated before God.

God had mercy on her and removed her reproach through the conception of her son.

But I think there's a little bit of prophetic foreshadowing here. Because Elizabeth's reproach was removed with this conception, but it was because of this child, of John the Baptist, that the Messiah would come who would strip the reproach of guilt, shame and condemnation from all who come to him in faith.

The gospel is for those who feel “full”—that is those who are sinful, shameful, prideful and doubtful. The gospel is for those who have “less”—that is those who feel helpless, worthless and hopeless. Time and time again, it's those who are aware of these realities who come to Jesus and find mercy. Where the gospel is believed the shackles of reproach fall to the ground.

Time and time again in the book of Luke we see God's mercy on those who seem powerless and helpless to get mercy from anyone. But when God moves, and when people believe, burdens are lifted.

It is John himself who will wrestle with doubt later on in this book, but look at what Jesus points him to: **Luke 7:22**.

John's message, the very message he needed reminded of later in life, is the message of mercy. That when God looks upon you in Jesus Christ, he gives you mercy. He removes your reproach and fills you with joy. May we be part of the many who rejoice at the conception of John the Baptist because our hearts have turned to this Lord of mercy.