

Good morning, Moon Valley!

Let me begin by saying thank you to all who have been praying for me and my family. God has sustained us through your prayers.

My mother is now in an acute rehabilitation hospital recovering from a stroke, a broken ankle, and some complications. We are hoping she will be able to recover sufficiently to live independently again, but she has a long road ahead.

My dad is back in his new home in memory care having landed in the hospital with COVID for five days. He is also undergoing physical therapy to regain his strength. Mercifully, he seems to have no sense of loss and is happy, even though he hasn't seen my mom in a month. His nurse at the hospital described him as a sweetheart.

Cathy and I are mostly recovered from COVID we probably got from my dad. We are well past the contagious part, but still have some brain fog, which could actually make my sermon today more interesting than usual.

In keeping with the medical malady theme, Wes Crenshaw, our Music and Programming Director has suffered for the better part of a year with a mysterious, debilitating illness that has affected his neuromuscular system to such an extent that he can now no longer sing normally using his diaphragm. And he gets around much of the time in a wheelchair.

So far, the numerous doctors he has seen are stumped. But more tests are planned.

I say this not only to invite your prayers on Wes's behalf, but also to explain why Wes has recently been singing with his head voice, and

why he has been doing fewer and fewer vocals. And after Christmas, we will be giving Wes an extended, paid break from his church responsibilities so he can get some rest and try to sort out his health.

We offered him the break sooner, but he refused it, insisting that he wanted to make it through Christmas. Those Appalachian boys are stubborn.

I realize this is not exactly cheery news to kick off our Christmas season. But in one way or another, suffering is something we all have in common. And the sermon for today speaks directly to the issue.

Today we begin a brand-new series titled, □ “So You Can Know For Sure.” It is a study through the Gospel of Luke. A gospel is a record of the life and teachings of Jesus.

Luke, the author of this gospel that bears his name, is a Gentile physician from Philippi who had accompanied the apostle Paul on some of his missionary journeys.

Luke writes his gospel to a man named Theophilus. We don't know much about Theophilus. From the honorific way Luke addresses him, some scholars suggest that he was a high-ranking Roman official. Luke's words to Theophilus also indicate that he has learned some things about Jesus, but his knowledge is somehow jumbled and incomplete. Theophilus is likely a new believer whose faith needs strengthening.<sup>1</sup>

The title of this sermon series, “So You Can Know For Sure” is taken from the stated purpose for Luke's gospel given in its introduction. Luke wants to set the record straight for his friend, Theophilus, so he can know for sure the most important things about Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Bock, 64.

Luke □ 1:1-4 constitutes the introduction. Luke writes to Theophilus,

ESV Luke 1:1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, □ 2 just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, □ 3 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, □ 4 that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

The key words here are □ “that you may have certainty.” That’s another way of saying “so you can know for sure.” Luke emphasizes the reliability of the historical account, having received his information from eyewitnesses and having investigated the veracity of the details for himself.<sup>2</sup>

Luke’s historical account includes perhaps the most famous Christmas passage ever in Luke 2. It’s the passage recited by Linus in “A Charlie Brown Christmas”—the one where the shepherds are described in King James English as being “sore afraid.”

Over the next several Sundays, we will retrace the story of the young couple everyone associates with Christmas, Joseph and Mary and their newborn king.

But Luke begins with a back story. It is the story of an elderly couple that nobody associates with Christmas: □ Zechariah and Elizabeth.

From these two ordinary people, we are going to learn about waiting in silence. There are times in life when we wait for God to save us from

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<sup>2</sup> Strauss, 318.

something. But he never does. At least it seems like he never does. We are faced with hardship and pain, and God seems entirely absent. And while we wait, having prayed fervently for some morsel of relief, God is silent. He doesn't even seem to bother to check in once in a while as an encouragement. There is nothing.

And in the nothingness, termites of doubt can slowly tunnel through the rafters of our faith. Outwardly, little has changed. We still go to church. We still try to be good and godly people.

But inwardly, there is a hollowness. We still believe in the God of Scripture. But we doubt that he has much to do with our everyday lives. We entertain the notion that we ourselves must not be important enough to warrant his attention. We feel like we're stuck in the waiting room of the great Physician. Inexplicably, some others seem to come and go. It looks like he sees them. But not us.

And so, we wait. In silence. And pain. And bewilderment.

How are we to navigate such seasons of life?

We are going to find some answers in our text for today, which is □ Luke 1:1-25. We have already covered the introduction in the first four verses. The main story of our text begins in □ Luke 1:5, where Luke writes,

ESV Luke 1:5 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.

The story is set □ “in the days of Herod.” Herod was a Roman king appointed by the Roman Emperor to rule over the land of Judea, which

is located roughly where modern Israel is. Herod reigned from 37 to 4 B.C. Our story occurs near the end of Herod's reign.

These were trying times in the history of Israel.

For one thing, Herod was a ruthless, power-hungry tyrant who had no interest in the things of God.<sup>3</sup> Herod is the guy who would later order the slaughter of all infants in and around Bethlehem in an effort to exterminate the newborn king, whom he viewed as a threat.

Moreover, at this moment in history, the people of Israel had not heard from God for 400 years. Historically, God had spoken to the people of Israel through prophets like Moses and Abraham and David and Isaiah and Jeremiah. But the last time God had spoken was through the prophet Malachi, 400 years earlier.

Consider for a moment how long 400 years is. Four hundred years ago, the pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock in the Mayflower. Four hundred years ago, Shakespeare died. Four hundred years ago, the United States of America did not yet exist, and Sir Isaac Newton had not yet been born.

Our story begins at the end of the 400 long years of silence.

Verse 5 says □ Zechariah was a Jewish priest from the division of Abijah. There were 24 priestly divisions. Each division performed duties in the Jewish temple on a rotational basis, twice a year for a week at a time. When not engaged in his priestly duties, Zechariah probably had a secular job. He was an ordinary guy.

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<sup>3</sup> Sproul, 15.

Also in verse 5, we learn that Zechariah's wife was named □ Elizabeth. She herself was a PK, a priest's kid. She was a descendant of a Jewish priest named Aaron. In that culture, you scored some spiritual points if you were a daughter of a priest who married a priest. It was about as priestly as you could get.

Verse □ 6 further describes the couple this way:

ESV Luke 1:6 And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

This indicates that both Zechariah and Elizabeth believed in God, and they were following God's laws contained in the Hebrew Scriptures. This doesn't mean they were sinless. Rather, they were following God's laws so closely that no one could discredit their ministry or call them hypocrites. In that way they were blameless. So, they were good, godly people.

But there was a painful burden that they had carried for many years. Luke explains it in □ verse 7.

ESV Luke 1:7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Number one on the list of what good Jewish women were expected to do to conform to feminine norms in ancient Israel was to bear children.

From the Hebrew Scriptures, every Jewish person knew that children were a blessing, a reward, a gift from God. But ancient Jewish culture took this one step further. They reasoned that, if being able to have children was a blessing, then not being able to have children must be a curse. To be barren was to be something less than a real woman. To be

barren was proof positive that God was disappointed in you. This was not an accurate view, but it was the prevailing one.

Elizabeth had dealt with this shame for years and had no prospect of escaping it because verse 7 says she is □ “advanced in years,” which means she is beyond childbearing. Zechariah and Elizabeth are likely in their 60s at this point.<sup>4</sup>

Think for a moment about what this must have been like for Elizabeth living in a culture that views her as a disgrace. Imagine Elizabeth hanging out with other women her age who delightfully talk about their children and grandchildren, and then maybe awkwardly alter their conversations in the presence of Elizabeth.

Imagine how hurtful it must have been.

Elizabeth gives it a name. Later in verse 25 she calls it a “reproach,” which is a very strong word. It means disgrace, shame, humiliation. Elsewhere in the Bible, it is a word used by a woman to describe how she felt about being raped by her own brother.

It is quite likely that both Elizabeth and Zechariah had fervently prayed to God for a child for the better part of four decades. And their prayers were met with silence from God. And on top of that, shame from their peers.

Verses □ 8 and 9 continue.

ESV Luke 1:8 Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, 9 according to the custom of the

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<sup>4</sup> Keener, 188.

priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

Zechariah had been chosen by lot to perform a very special priestly duty. Luke is careful to explain he was chosen by lot, suggesting a divine appointment because a childless priest would not have been a strong candidate from a human point of view. You see, there were about 18,000 Jewish priests in that day.<sup>5</sup> If a priest was chosen at all, he was chosen only once in his lifetime, and that, to offer incense in the temple on only one day.<sup>6</sup>

On that day, the chosen priest was to walk to the center of the sanctuary within the Jewish temple. There, before the altar of incense, he would bow to pray for the redemption of his people. That is, he would pray that God would come to save his people.

When the chosen priest was burning incense, he became the spiritual focal point of the nation. And the entire nation would unite their prayers with his. Verse □ 10 explains,

ESV Luke 1:10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.

While the priest was inside the temple, the people would gather outside to pray also. The hour of incense came twice a day, at 9:00AM and 3:30PM.<sup>7</sup>

While it must have been an honor for Zechariah to be chosen to pray

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<sup>5</sup> Nelson Study Bible.

<sup>6</sup> Gaebelin, 826.

<sup>7</sup> Nelson Study Bible.



for the salvation of his people in this way, it would be understandable if he secretly didn't expect anything to happen. After all, he had been praying for four decades for a child and nothing had happened. And priests like him had been praying for 400 years for the salvation of their people and nothing had happened.

But things are about to change.

Now, [verses 11 and 12](#) record something amazing that happened while Zechariah was in the temple praying.

ESV Luke 1:11 And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.

I like the fact that Zechariah was troubled and fearful. I would be, too, if an angel popped in on me!

Verse [13](#) continues:

ESV Luke 1:13 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."

When the angel says, "your prayer has been heard," we don't know exactly which prayer the angel was referring to. Was it the prayer for redemption? Or was it the earlier prayers for a child? Perhaps it was both. Indeed, both were interrelated.

Regardless, the angel says that, even though Elizabeth had been barren her whole life, and even though she was now beyond childbearing years, she was going have a child that was to be named John.

And, in the following verses, the angel explains that John—many would come to know him as John the Baptist—he would grow up to turn people to God, and to be a forerunner who would prepare the way for the coming Messiah. Zechariah and Elizabeth and their son, John, would be the preface to the Christmas story. Beginning in □ verse 14, the angel explains it this way:

ESV Luke 1:14 “And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 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. □ 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 17 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.”

Zechariah would have recognized that last part of the angel’s message as a reference to Malachi 4:5-6, which was the last promise God made to the people of Israel before the 400 years of silence. God had promised that a prophet would come in the spirit of Elijah to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. Now, 400 years later, the angel discloses to Zechariah that his yet-to-be-born son, John, will be that prophet.

Zechariah is flabbergasted. He can’t believe it. So, he asks for confirmation. Verse □ 18 says,

ESV Luke 1:18 And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”

Given the long silence of God and the hardship experienced by Zechariah, I can certainly sympathize with his unbelief. I may have responded the exact same way.

Verses □ 19 and 20 record the angel's response to Zechariah's unbelief.

ESV Luke 1:19 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. □ 20 And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."

Zechariah is temporarily rendered mute. Not only is he unable to speak, but later evidence suggests that he is also unable to hear (implied by Luke 1:62).

Becoming temporarily deaf and mute is, in part, a form of mild discipline for his unbelief.

But it is also a helpful object lesson. For months on end Zechariah will be unable to engage in oral communication. It is as if God is saying, "Zechariah, you are not speaking. No one hears a word from you. Does that prove that you are absent? Does that prove that you are inattentive? Does that prove that you are inactive? Of course not. Likewise, just because I do not speak for a time—whether it's 400 years or 40—it does not mean that I am absent or inattentive or inactive."

This object lesson would fortify the important message from God in verse 20: □ "my words . . . will be fulfilled in their time."

In this case, the Lord's "words" convey his way of redemption, his way of salvation, his way of deliverance, his way of securing our good.

And “their time” is God’s time. It is the time God ordains. It is *his* time, not ours.

From this I draw the big idea of this story and this sermon: ☐ God is working in his way and in his time for our good.

This is easy to say but hard to believe for at least two reasons.

First, his way is not our way. His way of securing my good is not the way I would do it. Through the prophet Isaiah, God says, “your ways are not my ways” (Isaiah 55:8). And when God’s ways do not match our expectations, we are sorely tempted to believe that he is not really working for our good after all.

Second, his time is not our time. His timing for securing my good does not run according to my preferred schedule. The apostle Peter tells us, “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Peter 3:8).

But we don’t like delays. They are unsettling. They raise questions about what God is up to. We want things to happen predictably and quickly. On our preferred timetable.

I sometimes fashion God in my own image and expect him to behave the way I would.

Even Zechariah’s delay within the temple creates a stir. Verse ☐ 21 explains,

ESV Luke 1:21 And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple.

When Zechariah does merge, he is unable to give the customary verbal blessing. Instead, he silently tries to communicate with gestures as if he were in a game of charades, only he can't hear anybody's guesses. Verses □ 22 and 23 explain,

ESV Luke 1:22 And 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. □ 23 And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

Imagine what it must have been like for Elizabeth to see her husband come out of the temple this way. My first thought would be, "This can't be good. What now? More shame?"

But at some point, maybe at home, Zechariah must have communicated the unbelievable story to her—maybe in writing, although the literacy rate was not high back then.

In the last two verses of our text, □ verses 24 and 25, the focus turns from Zechariah to Elizabeth. Luke writes,

ESV Luke 1:24 After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, 25 "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

We are not told why Elizabeth kept herself hidden for the first five months of her pregnancy, but it makes sense. Put yourself in Elizabeth's sandals. You are in your 60s. You have been barren and childless your whole life in a culture that considers it a disgrace.

If you were to go out in public, the inevitable question would arise, “Hey, what really happened with Zechariah in the temple? Why can’t he talk?”

The questioners might be secretly thinking, “You and Zechariah must be really messed up for God to shut your womb and his mouth.”

Then you would explain, “Well, after these 400 years, God has broken his silence by speaking to my husband. It turns out that I am going to have a baby. And he will be the prophet foretold in Malachi—the one who will prepare the way for the Messiah.”

And you could present absolutely no evidence to support your claim—not in the early days of your pregnancy. You can’t present the results of the pregnancy test you got at Walgreens. And you can’t say your period is late because you can’t remember that last time you had a period.

How do think it would go over to say, “God spoke and I am going to have a baby”? People would likely conclude that you are not only cursed, but you are also crazy. And fresh shame would be piled on top of the old shame.

It is reasonable to think that Elizabeth wanted to spare herself more shame. So, she waited five months until she was clearly showing and her pregnancy would then be undeniable.

Verse 24 indicates that, during the five months, Elizabeth kept □ “saying” something. The original Greek verb is in a form that suggests she kept on saying it repeatedly. Which raises a question: Who was she talking to?

We have already seen that she was not saying it to outsiders in public because she kept herself hidden.

And she probably wasn't saying it to Zechariah because he couldn't hear.

That leaves one person. Elizabeth kept saying it to herself. She engaged in self talk to correct the hollowness that had come from the termites of doubt slowly tunneling through the rafters of her faith because for years God's way and God's timing did not conform to her expectations.

In such hollowness, she still believed in the God of Scripture. But she came to doubt that he had much to do with her everyday life. She had entertained the notion that she herself must not be important enough to warrant God's attention. She felt like she had been stuck in the waiting room of the great Physician. Inexplicably, some others had seemed to come and go. It looked like he saw them. But not her.

But now, Elizabeth fills the hollowness with truth. She keeps saying in □ verse 25,

ESV Luke 1:25 "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

Let's unpack her words.

She says, □ "Thus the Lord has done for me." God himself has done something for me—me personally. On my behalf. For my sake. He is not absent. He is not inactive. He is not detached. He is not impersonal. He is not checked out. He is at work in my life and has been all along.

She says of the Lord □ "he looked on me." The original Greek word does not describe a casual glance; rather, it is to fix one's gaze upon another, to concern oneself with another. God is not inattentive or indifferent

toward me. God himself has gazed on me. He is attentive to me. He is interested in me. He has a plan for me.

She says, the Lord acted □ “to take away my reproach.” God himself has removed my shame. I am not the disgrace I feared I was. He has honored me with a special child, a special assignment. I am not a mistake. God has secured my good because he loves me.

This is Elizabeth’s way of telling herself the truth summarized in our big idea: □ God is working in his way and in his time for our good.

The Christmas season is upon us, but some of us don’t feel like ringing it in because we’re so wrung out.

We consider our painful circumstances and wonder, “how long?”

This is not the way we would have drawn it up.

We wouldn’t have let the suffering drag on.

How can this be good?

We need to be careful not to fashion God in our image, expecting him to conform to our expectations.

We need to fill in the hollowness with the truth, saying to ourselves again and again, God is working in his way and in his time for our good. And to rest in that. Because the preface to the Christmas story confirms it.

Today we have an opportunity to celebrate and remember God working in his way and in his time for our good in the person of Jesus Christ on the cross. And we do it through communion.



When we eat the bread, we are reminded of his body sacrificed on the cross in payment for our sins.

When we drink the cup, we are reminded of his blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

When we partake of these elements, we are proclaiming our faith in Jesus as our Savior.

In a moment, I am going to pray. After that, some music will be played. During the music, whenever you are ready, you may come forward to either one of the tables in front to receive the elements.

You may partake of the elements immediately at the table. Or you may take the elements back to your seat.

If, for any reason, you would prefer me to serve you the elements where you are seated, that would be my privilege. Whenever you are ready, just raise your hand, and I will come to serve you.

Let's pray. Lord, we are so grateful for your sacrifice on the cross in our place and on our behalf. Use communion today to help us to trust that you are working in your way and in your time for our good, even while we suffer and wait for you. Amen.