Advent 2026 ~ Home For The Holidays (with God & Others)
Introduction & Luke 1:1-25

Introduction

We've titled this Advent series "*Home For The Holidays–with God & Others*" because it taps a certain sentiment that we want to have and hold this time of year–family togetherness and belonging formed in, around, and with Jesus, while exploring and experiencing the traditional Advent themes of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

- *Where is "home" for you? I suppose that could be answered in a number of different ways…*
    - *Where's your hometown? (i.e. where were you born and raised)*
    - *Where do you currently live?*
    - *Where do you have a sense of belonging and family?*

- *We could also ask…*
    - *What sort of thoughts/feelings are evoked in you when you think of "home"? (Happy thoughts? Painful memories?)*
    - *What sort of "home" have you endeavored to create for yourself and your family?*
    - *Who is included when you speak of "family"?*

And isn't it interesting that when holidays arrive, "home" is where most people want to be? Have you ever wondered why that is? It's an interesting social phenomenon if you think about it… people migrating "home" (wherever that is) at key times on the calendar.

And what makes a "holiday" a holiday? Etymologically speaking, the word "holiday" is simply a contraction of Holy Day. "Holy" means "set apart". So, there are certain days we set apart as special, for one reason or another. Different places, cultures, and times have set apart different days as special…most often for religious purposes…sometimes for national or civic reasons or remembrances.

In our time and culture, the most special day of the year seems to be Christmas. At least, it's the holiday that gets the most fuss…religiously and secularly. Interestingly, nowhere in scripture are we called to celebrate or observe the birth of Jesus. As far as we know, the first recorded celebration of Christmas came in 336 AD. Easter, far and away, is the most theologically significant of all Holy Days from a Christian perspective. Some theorize that celebrating Christmas was an attempt to Christianize the pagan winter festivities. Others believe that it was less reactionary than that and was simply a desire to honor the birth of Jesus. Regardless, here we are.

- *How do you (honestly) feel about Christmas? How do you feel about holidays in general?*

There are only two places in canonical scripture that we can look to find anything about the birth of Jesus…the first couple of chapters of Matthew and the first couple of chapters of Luke. We're going to utilize Luke this Advent season…and beyond. Actually, we're going to stay in Luke through Easter. But we'll take a slower pace and smaller chunks of scripture per week during Advent.

For CUMC, this year is particularly special in that we've entered a new chapter as a church family…one in which we are all worshipping together. It seems fitting that this is occurring around the holidays. We want to linger together and immerse ourselves in our shared story, our shared identity, founded in Jesus.

Before we jump into the text, allow me to offer some friendly advice…particularly if you're one who feels intimidated by the Bible or if you don't have a lot of confidence in your Bible knowledge and understanding. We're going to be going through this at an easy pace. Allow yourself to read slowly…really linger in the passage. Try to notice details. (Or take note of the details that strike you.) Really allow your imagination to take in the scene/situation of the passage. Read the passage multiple times per week…allow yourself to stew on it. Ask lots of questions of the text…the more the better. When it comes to the Bible, we all gotta start somewhere. Don't worry if you don't understand everything…the Bible is a gift that's meant for us to explore indefinitely and never plumb the full depths of. So, just enjoy exposing yourself to what's in it, and trust that God is at work.

Of course, I would be remiss if I didn't offer you some Bible Project videos to compliment this study 🙂

- https://bibleproject.com/videos/luke-1-9/
- https://bibleproject.com/videos/luke-10-24/
- https://bibleproject.com/videos/gospel-luke-1/

*(***Note to Table Group Leaders: As always, I will provide more questions than you'll likely be able to use. In preparation, I suggest you be selective and choose just a few–the ones you think will get your group talking/processing the most. Or, come up with your own questions. Please remember, the goal is NOT to get through all the questions…rather, it's to build relationships through Christ-centered conversations.***)*

<u>1:1-4</u>

The Gospel of Luke is actually part of a two-volume set–Luke & Acts. While the author never identifies himself in either volume, early Church tradition strongly points to Luke. What do we know about Luke? He was a traveling companion of the apostle Paul, as Paul's letters and the more subtle clues in Acts attest. Tradition also holds that Mary (as in the mother of Jesus) was one of Luke's primary sources of material/information.

In these opening verses of the book, Luke mentions that he "*carefully investigated everything from the beginning…*" in order to "*write an orderly account*". (1:3) It is noteworthy that Luke

seems to have an audience of one in mind…somebody by the name of Theophilus. Scholars are not sure exactly who this was. The fact that Luke describes him as "*most excellent*" (1:3) seems to indicate that he was somebody significant…someone of rank and status.

Some of the theories about who Theophilus was include…

- ➢ A high-ranking official or government officer with whom Luke had some acquaintance and to whom Luke desired to offer a thorough account of Jesus.
- ➢ Perhaps he was a wealthy patron who was supporting Luke's research and missionary travels.
- ➢ Maybe he was a lawyer who was representing Paul in his trials, and Luke was gathering information for him.
- ➢ There was a Jewish high priest by the name of Mattathias ben Theophilus who Luke perhaps was acquainted with and writing to.
- ➢ Or, "Theophilus" wasn't actually an individual's name, per se, but was code for a community of believers, as "Theophilus" means "friend of God". (Most scholars tend to think he was an actual individual.)

Before we move on, there are three things I want to note, three things that are worth knowing and paying attention to as we move through this book.

1. Luke (and Acts) is generally considered to be the highest, most polished writing in the New Testament from a literary style perspective. It has the most sophisticated use of Greek vocabulary, grammar, and structure. This reinforces the idea that the author was highly educated, and likely a native Greek speaker, which Luke, as a Gentile, would have been.

2. Luke includes more activity by angels (we're going to see that immediately) compared to the other Gospel writers and highlights the activity of the Holy Spirit in the life and ministry of Jesus more than the other Gospel writers. (Though in the Gospel of John we see more teaching about the Holy Spirit…here in Luke we see the work of the Holy Spirit throughout the story.) So keep an eye out for that.

3. As we noted when we went through Luke back in 2023 (a Lenten series we called *The Gospel of Nobodies*), Luke, more than the other Gospel writers, demonstrates how the gospel overcomes social barriers by highlighting people who otherwise would be overlooked or disregarded. In other words, Luke stresses how the gospel (i.e. Jesus and His Kingdom) is for EVERYONE. So notice the specific individuals who are encountered in Luke's account.

- *What kind of books do you like to read? (Fiction or non-fiction? History? Biography? Science fiction? Romance? Mystery? Articles? etc.) Why are you particularly drawn to those? Who is your favorite author(s)/writer(s)?*

1:5-25

The first people Luke introduces us to is an older couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, both of whom were "*…upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly*." (1:6, emphasis added) Upright and blameless are important to note because we're also told, "*…they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren…*" (1:7) The prevailing assumption of the time would have been that she was barren because they (or she) must NOT be so upright and blameless. Having no children carried with it a stigma that somehow you got what you deserved. But, to those familiar with the Biblical story, an old childless couple would harken back to Abraham and Sarah and signal that God is about to do something significant.

Why did the ancient Israelites think this way? Well, on one level, humans in general, across time, place, and culture have a tendency toward karma-type thinking, regardless if it actually fits within their claimed religious/theological framework. And also, within the Old Testament Law, childlessness was a curse associated with disobedience (see Deuteronomy 28:15-18). This is why it is important for Luke to note that they were, in fact, upright and blameless.

Let's try to put ourselves in the shoes of Eliabeth and Zechariah. They tried their best to be faithful to God, following the Lord's commandments as best they could. They likely entered marriage years, decades, earlier with hopes of a family. They really had no idea why they were not blessed with children, but they felt the non-spoken questions other people had about them because of it. They lived with the cloud of disappointment, confusion, and unmet expectations in their twilight years.

Culturally, Elizabeth would have carried the extra burden of disgrace, as commentator Craig Keener explains, "*Most people assumed that barrenness was a defect of the wife, and Jewish teachers generally insisted that a man divorce a childless wife so he could procreate.*" (Keep this in mind for later in the story.) At this juncture it is important to note that while we do see patriarchy and misogyny described in scripture, we do not see it prescribed in scripture. That is an important distinction to make. Many abuses of scripture come when this distinction is not made.

Additionally, children were basically the "social security" plan for Israel. Economically, adult children would care for their parents in old age…this is part of what it meant to "Honor your father and your mother" (the 5th Commandment…see Exodus 20:12). Actually, this has been the plan for most of human history. While it strays from the framework of this particular passage, some deep thinking and conversation around Biblical/Christian elder-care is a worthy conversation.

- *As you reflect on your life presently, what disappointments and unmet expectations are you living with? How is your life different today than you had imagined it would be at this stage of the game?*

- *How has life thrown you a curveball? What has transpired in your life that you never wanted? What hasn't transpired in your life that you wish had?*

- *What sorts of confusions and doubts have you wrestled with over the years (or, perhaps, are you currently wrestling with)?*

- *Social stigmas are real and powerful. Elizabeth had lived with hers for quite some time. But what about you? Have you ever felt stigmatized, ostracized, marginalized, lesser-than, or made to feel like you were inadequate or didn't measure up? If you're willing to, please share your experience.*

(The above questions are intentionally personal. Table Group is meant to be a safe place where we get real with each other.)

But the tide was about to turn for this elderly couple. We're told that Zechariah was a priest. There were an estimated 18,000 priests in Israel at the time…far more than could be utilized at any one time. The priests were subdivided into divisions (likely by clan) and would serve one week, twice a year at the temple. The honor of offering the incense was chosen by lot and was likely a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity…many priests likely never had such an opportunity. So that was a pleasant surprise for Zechariah…but the surprises were just beginning…

As I mentioned earlier, Luke describes more angelic activity than any of the other gospel writers. Now we see his first inclusion in the story, "*Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him…*" (1:11) Now I don't know what your impression is of angels, but scripture depicts them as rather intimidating. Notice Zechariah's response. "*…he was startled and was gripped with fear.*" (1:12, emphasis added) This seems to be a consistent response to angels as they appear throughout scripture. And angels often end up saying, "*Do not be afraid…*" (1:13) to whoever they are talking to. Incidentally, "angel" means "messenger", which is their function…to deliver a message, as we see in this passage (see 1:13-17).

Notice that the angel said to Zechariah, "*your prayer has been heard.*" (1:13) So apparently Zechariah had not given up hope. Even at the highlight of his career, his heart was still heavy and longing for a child.

- *What is something you have been praying for/about for a long time? For what are you holding onto hope that God will hear and act?*

As we would expect, if God is going to send an angel with a message, it's going to be a really important message. And this message/announcement was much bigger than just that Zechariah and Elizabeth were going to have a baby. Their son was to be the forerunner of the Messiah. Friends, this is a BIG deal. The long-awaited, long-anticipated, long-hoped-for Messianic age was about to finally break through. And Elizabeth and Zechariah were getting to play a unique role in it.

Oh, but Zechariah had his questions about all this (see 1:18). Apparently an angelic announcement wasn't enough to convince him about the validity of this message. And this wasn't just some run-of-the-mill angel, by the way…oh, no, this was Gabriel (1:19). There are

only two angels ever named in the Bible–Gabriel and Michael. (That is, in the Old and New Testaments. Others are named in the extracanonical books and apocrypha).

- *As you imagine it, how would you describe Gabriel's response to Zechariah's question/ doubt? Was he upset or offended? Was he flabbergasted or perplexed? Did he think Zechariah's question was comical? Allow your imagination to play with 1:19, and share your thoughts with one another.*

- *Zechariah struggled to believe the good news that Gabriel presented to him. What good news from the Christian story do you struggle to believe?*

- *Maybe Zechariah was protecting himself from getting his hopes up…or getting Elizabeth's hopes up…and wanted some certainty or guarantee. In what ways do you guard yourself against disappointment? What are the pros and cons of that approach?*

Well, Zechariah wanted some certainty about this too-good-to-be-true message. Apparently an angel wasn't enough for Zechariah. So he was given a special "sign" to hold on to for a while. He would be mute until his son John was born. In verse 22 we see the first historical record of Charades being played. (Just kidding…I just made that up…but the scene has that sort of feel to it, doesn't it?)

That must have been an interesting trip home for Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah knew their life was about to change dramatically, but how was he going to communicate that to Elizabeth? (Actually, later in the story, we'll see Zechariah utilize a writing tablet…so perhaps he employed one with Elizabeth to explain things to her. But that's just a guess. Regardless, it was an awkward situation.)

Obviously, Elizabeth conceived. While the Lord may have "helped" the situation in some manner, it's also safe to assume that Zechariah and Elizabeth did their natural biological part in the conception process. It makes one wonder if Zechariah not being able to talk might have helped that process along.

Elizabeth, for her part, gave credit where credit was due, "*The Lord has done this for me…In these days He has shown His favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.*" (1:25) This echoes the matriarch Rachel (wife of Jacob) who also struggled to get pregnant (see Genesis 30:23). I wonder what all those people who had scrutinized Elizabeth were thinking now? You can imagine the scuttlebutt around town, "*Did you hear about Elizabeth? Can you believe it?*" And you can imagine how vindicated Elizabeth must have felt.

- *Describe a time when you felt vindicated. Or, what are you still waiting/hoping for some vindication on?*

Soul Training Exercise ~ Prepare…with Silence, Solitude, Stillness

Advent is a time/season of preparation, reflection, anticipation. Preparation for what? For the arrival of the King! If someone significant, someone of importance, was coming to your house, I imagine you would do some extra preparing. Well, Jesus is the most important person ever. Even the story we just looked at is all about preparation. Remember, John the Baptizer's entire role/function was "*…to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*" (1:17, emphasis added)

I expect that all of us do some level of preparation (probably in the form of decoration) of our homes in anticipation of Christmas–trees, ornaments, lights, tinsel, wreaths, candles, etc. But how do we prepare our hearts for Jesus?

For many, this time of year is one of the most busy, most hectic, most stressful, most easily distracting times of the year…which sort of runs contrary to the whole point of the season.

With that in mind, the invitation for us this Advent season is to have a regular (I'd recommend daily) "pause"…or "timeout"…a time when we allow ourselves some peace and quiet through silence, solitude, and stillness. This will be our baseline Soul Training Exercise for Advent. So this first week of Advent, simply try to set some time aside to be still (sit, breathe), to be silent/ quiet (not just noise, but also your mind), by yourself. It doesn't have to be long (shoot for at least 5 minutes…though if you can go longer, then by all means do so).

A good way to ease into this time of silence, solitude, stillness is to read the passage for the coming week…slowly, reflectively, prayerfully. As you sit quietly, ruminate on the passage, as opposed to the myriad of other thoughts that may try to force their way into your consciousness. Perhaps end your time with a simple little "Thank you" to Jesus for sitting with you.

We will build on this practice in the coming weeks.

P.S. Next week's reading is Luke 1:26-38