

December 17, 2017

Luke: My dear Theophilus. Do you remember my telling you, years ago now, that I wanted to write down the story of Jesus for future generations? You might have thought that I had given up on that plan, since others have already done so, but I am still very much in earnest. I have read these works, both that of my old missionary companion Mark as well as the version produced by that dear, dear fuddy-duddy Matthew. Both have much value. Indeed I have a copy of Mark's work with me to use as a framework. But for the past several years I have been interviewing many of the principals of the story, and from those interviews, I have learned much of importance that neither of the earlier books have included. So I propose to write yet a third version of the good news, adding to what has been done.

⁵ In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸ Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.

You see? The story starts even before Jesus' parents – with the parents of the Baptizer. To summarize what followed: Zechariah questioned the angel – why is it that religious professionals are always the slowest to recognize the work of God? – and he was struck dumb as a consequence. He was unable to speak through all the long months of old Elizabeth's pregnancy. It wasn't until the child was born that God loosed his tongue, and even then he didn't speak. Elizabeth says he went straight from silence to music, singing, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who has come to set the chosen people free. The Lord has raised up for us a mighty savior from the house of David."

HYMN #209 "Blessed Be the God of Israel"

SPECIAL MUSIC "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence" Judith Treisback
Handbell Choir

Luke: But eventually, dear Theophilus, we do have to get to the remarkable Mary. Neither Mark nor Matthew says much about her at all, which is a ridiculous oversight. No one who has met her will forget Mary.

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The angel said to her, 'The

Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.*

Perhaps the most important interview I ever had was when I talked with Mary. The most remarkable woman, nay the most remarkable human being, I have ever met. A woman who meets an angel and isn't frightened – just "perplexed." Even Gabriel couldn't believe it. He tried to reassure her anyway. But she brushed off his patronizing comfort and simply asked for more information. What a physician that woman would have made! But she was, first, a woman of faith. Given the task of bearing the Son of the Most High, she simply folded her hands and said, 'Let it be to your servant as you wish.' For this reason, if for no other, I *have* to write my own version of the story: to make sure that future generations meet Mary.

SPECIAL MUSIC "Mary Had a Baby" Craig Carnahan
Chancel Choir

What you must understand, Theophilus, is that this Mary was noble in every way except bloodline. She was a commoner, and engaged to a commoner named Joseph. Yes, it's all very well for dear dear Matthew to prate on and on about Joseph's royal blood, but let's be honest here. A *lot* of Jews have royal blood. The old kings got around. Joseph may have come from the royal tribe of Judah, but he was working as a builder in a backwater village in the land of Zebulun. The only reason Jesus was born in Bethlehem instead of in Nazareth, the armpit of Galilee, was because of that census that Augustus took. Joseph had to go to Bethlehem to be counted, and he couldn't afford it, and Mary was pregnant, and the inns were full, and so they ended up in a stable. There's your royal heritage for you. I'm telling you, Jesus was a commoner. And as much as Matthew might like to talk about the foreign dignitaries who brought him costly presents from afar, they weren't the ones who first greeted the newborn baby Jesus.

*⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'*

SPECIAL MUSIC "Come and See the King" Ken Berg
Men's Ensemble

You could ask why God chose to reveal himself first to shepherds, to low-wage workers at the bottom of the social scale, the ones who got stuck with the night shift, but the answer is simple. Poor people share. If you are ever penniless, Theophilus, do not go to a rich man for help. He will look down his nose at you and say that you're probably just going to spend it on wine and give you nothing. No, go to someone who has but one loaf of bread to his name. He will gladly give you half, because he knows hunger himself.

And what is true of material things is equally true of good news. Only those who look disaster in the face every day will recognize good news and immediately turn around and share their good news with others.

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who

heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

SPECIAL MUSIC "*Glad Tidings of Joy*" Mark Hayes
Ellesi

So there, my dear Theophilus, is how I would begin the good news, with the commoner maid and the builder Joseph, with the low-caste and (doubtless) vile smelling shepherds in the middle of the night, in a reeking stable. That's how the story *must* begin, because it is the story of the man who walked among the rabble, ate dinner with thieves and pickpockets and whores, touched the unclean, embraced the leper, and who never met an outcast he would not befriend. Yes, I would tell my poor quaint old friend Matthew, he was a king, but that's not the point. The point is that he was a different kind of king. I shall send more later. Your friend, Luke.

SPECIAL MUSIC "*Carols Around (and a Round)*" arr. Carl Nygard, Jr.