

Daily Scripture Study

John the Baptist is Announced

1st week of Advent covers **Luke 1:1-25**

Session 1 – READ Luke 1:1-4

Scripture references

vv. 1-4 – Theme: Revelation - Acts 1:1-5, 21-22; 1 Cor 15:3, Heb 3:1, 1 John 1:1, John 15:27, 20:31, Lk 24:48

In Luke 1:1-4, we see Luke laying the foundation for his Gospel account, an account which actually has two parts. Luke wrote both the Gospel named for him and the Acts of the Apostles, intending the two to be read together as one story. Indeed, if you compare Luke 1:1-4 with Acts 1:1-5, Luke himself tells us this.

Luke's opening Gospel passage tells us several things. First, we discover that many people who were not eyewitnesses, including Luke, are compiling accounts of the life of Jesus. Second, these accounts are based on the testimony of still-living eyewitnesses. Third, Luke is writing "an orderly account" to Theophilus. A fourth useful piece of information is that "Theophilus" literally means in Greek "One who loves God." So, what can we take away from the first four verses of the Gospel of Luke? We know that this Gospel is based on eyewitness accounts, we know that God intends this Gospel account to be orderly, so that we may better comprehend it, and we know that it is addressed to the one who loves God. That is, in a very real sense, God is speaking to each one of us here, establishing his credentials with us, demonstrating his love and the care that He takes in order to make sure that we will have a very clear idea about Him and His relationship to us.

The first thing a careful reader will be struck by are the details Luke supplies. He tells us the words of the conversation between the angel and Zechariah while they were together in the temple as Zechariah burned incense. During this time, Zechariah was alone with the angel. This means Luke had to have interviewed Zechariah to find out the particulars of the story. Likewise, the conversation he records between Mary and the archangel Gabriel was an intimate conversation, known only to those two. Mary must have related these details to

Luke, for no one else would have known them. Indeed, many Scripture scholars have noted that the first two chapters of Luke are written in a Greek that is stylistically quite different from the rest of the Gospel. The first two chapters actually appear to be a translation from another language into Greek. This is not surprising when we remember that Mary and Zechariah undoubtedly spoke Aramaic as their first language. Luke is giving us their accounts in their own words, translating their Aramaic directly into the Greek.

Luke's insistence on using eyewitness accounts is characteristic of apostolic preaching. Paul, for instance, tells us this. The Gospel the apostles all preach is the Gospel each one of them heard himself from the Lord (1 Cor 15:3, Heb 3:1). John's first letter will likewise begin with the same assertion – the apostles preach only what they have seen with their own eyes and touched with their own hands (1 John 1:1). When the office of apostle is empty, Peter insists it can only be filled by someone who has been a physical witness to the fact of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:21-22). The apostles stick strictly to the facts – what they can personally testify to - so that everyone may come to belief and have eternal life (John 20:31). At the Last Supper, Jesus told the apostles to act as His witnesses, and He repeated the command again after His Resurrection (Jn 15:27, Luke 24:48). The Gospel writers, like the other apostles, are faithful to His commands.

Questions for study:

1. What does Luke promise about his rendition of events?
2. What evidence seems to indicate he really has interviewed eyewitnesses?
3. Is his insistence on eyewitness accounts unusual? How do we know?
4. What do these answers tell us about the way God reveals Himself to us?
5. How could this information be useful when we talk to other people about Jesus?

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Session 2 – READ Luke 1:5-7

Scripture references

vv. 1:5 – Theme: Time, priestly divisions - Mt 2:1, 1 Chron 24:10, 2 Chron 31:2

vv. 1:7 – Theme: Barrenness - Gen 15:3, 16:1, 18:11, 25:21, 29:31, 30:1, 30:24, Jgs 13:2-5, 1 Sam 1:2-6

Both Matthew and Luke agree on the time and place of Jesus' birth: it occurred during Herod's reign in Judea. Today, some people refuse to believe the Gospel accounts because the four accounts of Jesus' life sometimes differ with one another in certain details. However, disagreements between the four accounts is not fatal to the truth of the Gospel. We must remember that first-century Jews told stories in a markedly different way than 20th-century readers are accustomed to. We are used to strict chronology – if A, B and C happened in a certain order, then they must be told in that order. For them, however, if A and C shared a common theme or served to illustrate a point, it was perfectly reasonable to group A and C together and leave B to be told at a later time. The writer would not tell the reader that events had been “grouped by theme.” Jewish Scripture has always relied heavily on oral teaching traditions. Teachers were expected to guide students through the readings. The writer assumed every reader had a teacher who would orally explain the proper order of events if the need arose.

Today's three verses carry two interesting themes. The first concerns Zechariah and Elizabeth. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth hold privileged positions in the nation of Israel: Elizabeth descends from Aaron, Moses' brother (Exodus 4:27). Aaron performed the first four miracles in front of Pharaoh and was the first high priest, anointed by Moses himself. Zechariah, as a male descendant of Aaron, is therefore also a Levitical priest. As Matthew 1:7 shows, Abijah, Zechariah's forefather, is the great-grandson of David and also a forefather of Jesus.

Abijah's family had obtained, through lot, the eighth place in the service of the Temple, a fact whose significance will be explored in the next session. Yet, though the lineage of both Zechariah and Elizabeth are noble, Luke follows by telling us something even more important: both Elizabeth and Zechariah were righteous and blameless. What Luke says about them reminds us of what the apostle Paul will tell us about himself in 1 Corinthians 4:3-5 and Phillipians 3:4-6.

However, neither their righteousness nor their nobility protects them from sterility. The two results of the Fall were greatly multiplied pain in childbearing for the woman and increased toil for the man in securing food (Gen 3:16-19). The first three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, each experienced a severe famine which required them to leave their homes. Each of their wives experienced the greatest pain of childbearing, sterility. Hannah, the woman who brought forth the first prophet to ever anoint a king over Israel, was sterile, as was the woman who brought forth Samson, the strength of Israel. Elizabeth's patiently borne sterility, healed by God, results in the greatest prophet of Scripture, John the Baptist. In each healing, God shows forth His power to heal the consequences of our sins.

Questions for study:

1. God's Chosen People relied on oral tradition to understand Scripture. How does this understanding correspond to Catholic teaching?
2. Zechariah and Elizabeth were of exalted lineage, but they also lived holy lives. We are made priest, prophet and king by baptism. How does Luke show us that Zechariah and Elizabeth are models for baptized people?
3. God permitted each of the sterile women in Scripture to bear important children. How are these women an example to us that every child is always a gift from God?
4. God is Life. Human life is a gift from God. How does the use of temporary or permanent self-sterilization affect our relationship with God?

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Session 3 – READ Luke 1:8-12

Catechism of the Catholic Church

paragraph reference numbers to Luke 1:11

332: The work of angels in the divine plan

Scripture references

v. 1:9 – Theme: Burning incense - Ex 30:7

v. 1:11 – Theme: Angelic appearances - Lk 2:9, Acts 5:19

Zechariah's family was chosen by lot to be the eighth priestly family. Zechariah was chosen by lot to burn incense. This ancient Hebrew tradition of casting lots to determine function and office in divine liturgy will be seen again in Acts 1:26, when it is used to choose between Matthias and Barsabbas to fill the office of apostle. As Num 26:55, 33:54 or Judges 20:9 shows us, the casting of lots was a divinely instituted method for choosing successors or dividing up property. In fact, these Old Testament passages show us that the use of lot was the key to inheritance. When the Promised Land was divided up among the Twelve tribes, it was divided by lot. Thus, Zechariah's being chosen by lot for the Temple worship is a sign that a new inheritance is coming.

Zechariah was the priest chosen to burn incense in the Temple. The burning of incense before the presence of God began with the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 30:1), continued through the priestly service in the Temple, and was seen by the apostle John in the vision he recorded, the Book of Revelation (Rev 5:8, 8:3-4). The burning of incense is still performed today. The incense represents both the prayers of the faithful rising to God and the sweet odor of the perfect sacrifice the Son of God made on the Cross.

The Jews burned incense for two reasons, one of which they realized, and a second they did not. They knew the smoke of incense represented the prayers of all the faithful, rising up to God as a pleasing aroma before Him. This is why the whole people prayed outside the temple at the hour of

incense – the actions within were actively linked with the actions outside. What they did not realize was that the thurimer (or censor), in which the incense burned, was itself a symbol of the Incarnation God was about to accomplish. The censor in which the burning coal is contained represents Jesus' human nature, the burning coals inside it represent the divine nature of God, who is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29). Thus, when Christians use the censor we are reminded that all of our prayers rise to God only God in the flesh. Only through Jesus Christ, the one mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5) are our prayers made effective. This is why it is most appropriate to use the censor during Mass and Eucharistic benediction. It unites our understanding as the prayers and the incense were united at the Temple. The incense and the thurimer are symbolic representations of God Incarnate, Christ and His mediation. God comes to dwell among us in answer to the prayers of His People.

This Eucharistic connection, God coming in the flesh, is foreshadowed in two additional ways. First, Zechariah's family was the eighth of the 24 groups of Levitical priests (1 Chronicles 24:7-19). Jesus, the first Apostle and our High Priest (Hebrews 3:1), rose one day after the seventh (sabbath) day, that is, He rose on the eighth day (Sunday). Zechariah's eighth-group priesthood is thus symbolically linked to the eighth-day Resurrection. Second, the angel appeared silently to Zechariah near the altar, the place of sacrifice. Only priests offer sacrifice. From that location, Gabriel announced God's preparations for the coming of the True High Priest.

John will be made exceptionally holy and will lead many to salvation. His whole life prepares the Messiah's way. "John" means "God is gracious." As Paul reminds us in 1 Cor 3:9, we are God's co-workers. Through the prophets of the Old Testament and through Zechariah and John the Baptist, God graciously allows men to prepare His way. In Luke 7:26-27, he will remind us that Jesus Himself links the prophecy of Malachi 3:1 to John's coming.

Here, Zechariah is struck by fear at the presence of an angel. At Jesus' birth, the shepherds will react the same way. When Peter is in prison, he is so struck by the angelic presence that he thinks he is having a vision. Angels are messengers of God, sent to help men know how best to do God's will. They are living signs of communion with God. Their presence is strongest in the infancy narratives and the

Resurrection accounts.

Questions for study:

1. What does a censor symbolize? What does incense symbolize?
2. Why is it appropriate to use incense in the celebration of the Mass?
3. In the first century, sons took the vocations of their fathers. Why doesn't John do this? What could be more important than offering sacrifice to God as a Levitical priest?
4. An altar is a place of sacrifice. Read Mt 14:8-10. How is John's whole life, even from the moment of the angel's announcement, a foreshadowing of Christ?
5. How does the *Catechism's* description improve your understanding of angels?

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Session 4 – READ Luke 1:13-16

Catechism of the Catholic Church

paragraph reference numbers to Luke 1:15-19

717: A man sent by God

Scripture references

v. 1:13 – Theme: name-giving - Gen 2:19-20, Lk 1:30, 57, 60, 63, Mt 1:20-21, 1 Cor 3:9, 1 Cor 4:15

v. 1:15 – Theme: Nazirite vow - Num 6:3, Lk 7:33, Jgs 13:4, 1 Sam 1:11 (LXX)

Giving a name demonstrates authority and stewardship. Scripture shows Adam's authority over the animals by the fact that he was permitted to name them. Similarly, though God provides the names for both John the Baptist and Jesus, the act of naming is left to the parents. God intends us to be His co-workers (1 Cor 3:9). He gives every person real authority in the world. This is especially true of parents, for every bringing forth of a child is a vibrant share in the work of creation. We are parents biologically in begetting children, but we only become fully parents when we teach our children about God (1 Cor 4:15).

Gabriel's own name means "might of God." The might of God treats Zechariah and Mary quite differently (Luke 1:18-23, 1:34-38). This difference is based on the different understandings they displayed: Zechariah *doesn't believe* God can give life through the marital act he performs with his wife. His reply does not question his own ability to accomplish the creation of a child, it questions God's ability – how could God make he and Elizabeth fertile? Mary believes God can bring forth children from her womb, she simply *doesn't understand* how she could become pregnant since she has never had sex (verse 34). Zechariah essentially tells the angel he is doing his part, but questions God's ability to do His part. Mary, on the other hand, is sure God can accomplish whatever He wants, but she knows she is not doing her part of the work. Is God

calling her to do something she had not intended to do? Zechariah's disbelief is silenced, Mary's belief is confirmed and enlightened.

The angel tells Zechariah that John will live out a permanent vow as a Nazirite, as both Samson and Samuel did in the Old Testament. Nazirite vows did not have to be permanent, but anyone who was bound by such a vow was consecrated to the Lord for the length of the vow. We know that John kept it because Jesus alludes to that fact later in this Gospel (Lk 7:33).

The description of the Nazirite vow is contained in Num 6:1-21. The Nazirite vow is a rich foreshadowing of Jesus work on the Cross.

The Nazirite must (1) avoid wine and even grapes, (2) allow his hair to grow freely, (3) avoid dead bodies. Wine is a sign of joy, it prefigures Eucharist (Gen 27:25, Eccl 10:19, Sir 31:27-28). Jesus avoids drinking the fruit of the vine after celebrating the Last Supper, for He will be taking on the sorrow of mankind's sinfulness. He will drink it only on the point of death (John 19:30). The hair of the Nazirite reminds us of the hair of Esau (Gen 25:25-27). Esau's excessive hairiness was a sign of his animal tendencies, his sinful tendencies, his tendency to permit his appetites to control him and his destiny: a hungry Esau exchanged his birthright for a bowl of soup (Gen 25:29-34). The Nazirite growth of hair prefigures Christ taking on our sins on the Cross. Finally, death is the consequence of sin which Jesus alone takes upon Himself and conquers on the Cross. The Nazirite avoids the fruit of the vine, and grows in hairiness. Jesus avoids the fruit of the vine until the Father's Kingdom is established because He takes on our sins (Mt 26:29). The Nazirite avoids death because Christ will take on death for him.

The Nazirite purification after contact with a dead body foreshadows the Resurrection. If a Nazirite accidentally comes in contact with a dead body, he offers two pigeons and shaves his head on the seventh day, then offers a lamb on the eighth day. Pigeons, or doves, are signs of the Holy Spirit. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus descends into hell on the seventh day, and rises on the eighth day. He is the Lamb of God.

Upon the completion of the vow, the Nazirite offers a lamb for holocaust, a ewe for sin, a ram, and a cereal offering covered with oil. Jesus is the lamb of God who made a

holocaust offering of Himself on the Cross, he did it for His Ewe, His Bride, the Church. The Nazirite ram recalls the ram offered when Abraham sacrificed his son Isaac. Since oil is a sign of the Holy Spirit, the cereal offering covered with oil is another foreshadowing of the Eucharist. After the vow is complete, the Nazirite shaves off his hair, signifying the removal of sin, and offers the shorn hair as a peace offering. He is given unleavened bread, and may again drink wine. After having our sins removed, we may again partake of Eucharist. Thus, in the completion of the vow, the Nazirite prefigures the establishment of the Eucharist.

Questions for study:

1. Why is naming important? Why should Christian parents choose to name our children after saints?
2. Why did the angel treat Zechariah and Mary differently?
3. Why is John's Nazirite vow important to his proclamation of Jesus?
4. How many different ways have the Incarnation and the Cross been foreshadowed in these first sixteen verses of Luke's Gospel?
5. From God's point of view, how is the Incarnation like the Crucifixion?

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Session 5 – READ Luke 1:14-16

Catechism of the Catholic Church

paragraph reference numbers to Luke 1:15-19

717: A man sent by God

Scripture references

1:15 – Theme: Nazirite vow - Num 6:3, Lk 7:33, Jgs 13:4, 1 Sam 1:11 (LXX)

Like 80% of all the Old Testament references Jesus, His apostles, and His Scripture writers make in the New Testament, the angel's implicit Old Testament reference to 1 Samuel comes not from the Hebrew version of Scripture, but from the Greek version. The Hebrew version does not tell us that Samuel will avoid wine and liquor during his life, but the Greek version of Scripture does. The Greek version is sometimes called the Septuagint, which means "the seventy." It is often abbreviated LXX, i.e., the number "70" in Roman numerals. The name comes from the legend that the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek by seventy Greek and Hebrew scholars around the year 250 BC. The differences between the Septuagint and the Hebrew Scriptures are important.

After the Babylonian Exile, 500 years prior to the birth of Christ, many of the Jews taken out of Israel decided not to return. Though they desired to maintain their faith, their descendants, like modern immigrants, learned the language of the country they lived in and forgot their native tongue, Hebrew. Due to Alexander the Great's conquests 300 years before the birth of Christ, everyone came to speak *koine*, or common, Greek – it was the language of trade. These Jews of the Babylonian Dispersion, who lived far from the Temple, wanted some way of maintaining their worship, and for them, the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek. Subsequent writers of Scripture added to the Greek version without necessarily translating these newer Greek books back into

Hebrew. As a result the Greek version of Jewish Scriptures has more books than the Hebrew version. Likewise, the Greek version of the Scriptures, in books like Isaiah and 1 Samuel, have passages which differ, sometimes very much so, from the Hebrew version.

When the apostles went out into the world to explain the Scriptures to the Jews, and eventually to the Gentiles, they could not use the Hebrew Scriptures because neither audience understand Hebrew. Thus, the apostles always used the Greek. Even Jesus did this, for He quotes from the Septuagint far more often than He does from the Hebrew version of Scripture. The Catholic Bible is based on the Septuagint. Most other Christian Bibles are based on the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, the Catholic Bible contains seven books Protestant Bibles do not (Tobit, Judith, Baruch, Wisdom, Sirach, 1 and 2 Maccabees) and longer versions of two other books (Daniel has a much longer chapter three, and three more chapters at the end, while Esther has six chapters unknown to the Protestant Bible).

Jewish leaders who had to deal with the growing Christian faith after the Resurrection ultimately decided to reject the Septuagint. They did not like having Scripture used to demonstrate the truth of Christ, and the books of the Septuagint were often quoted against them. They responded by saying those books were not inspired. Thus, the Catholic Bible is based on the Bible translation Jesus and the apostles preferred, while the Protestant Bible is based on the Scripture preferred by non-Christian Jews. While Jesus and the apostles did not quote from every book of either the Hebrew or the Greek Old Testament, and they clearly did not directly quote from any of the Septuagint books listed above, there are several implicit references to these Septuagint books in the New Testament, both in the Gospels and the epistles. If you are interested in learning more, read the section on Scripture in my book *Bible Basics*, Basilica Press, 2000.

Questions for study:

1. Ancient Christians said, "The New Testament is hidden in the Old, while the Old Testament is revealed in the New." Think about all the foreshadowing we have seen so far, and explain, in your own words, what this phrase means.
2. How does this understanding of how the two Testaments relate to one another help us understand the phrase, "The whole of Scripture talks about Christ"?
3. When it comes to determining what books of Scripture are really part of Scripture, we have two choices. We can rely on the judgement of post-Christian Jews who do not recognize Christ as God, or on the judgement of early Christians led by the apostles and their successors, who were commissioned by Christ Himself. Which is more likely to be reliable? Why?
4. According to the *Catechism*, how are Mary, Jesus, Elizabeth and John linked?

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Session 6 – READ Luke 1:17-25

Catechism of the Catholic Church

paragraph reference numbers to Luke 1:15-23

523: St. John the Baptist

718: The new Elijah

696: Fire, symbol of the Spirit

724: Mary manifests the Holy Spirit

716: The People of the poor

1070: What is liturgy?

717: A man sent by God

2684: The communion of saints

Scripture references

v. 1:17 - Theme: Spirit of Elijah - Mal 3:1, 4:5, Sir 48:10, Mt 11:14, 17:13, Lk 3:23-24,

v. 1:18 – Theme: Humility - Lk 1:34

v. 1:19 – Theme: Gabriel - Dan 8:16, 9:21, Mt 18:10

v. 1:20 – Theme: Belief - Lk 1:45

v. 1:25 - Theme: Removing reproach - Gen 30:23, Is 4:1

Both Malachi and Sirach prophesied of the coming of John the Baptist, and Jesus confirmed that John did, indeed, carry the spirit of Elijah. Although John is perfectly correct to say that he is not Elijah, he carries the power Elijah did (John 1:21). Thus, the angel's words tell of the fulfillment of prophecy.

However, when we look at his words in verse 17, Gabriel also tells us something else. He speaks of John's ability to turn the hearts of fathers to the children and the disobedient to the just. Despite Gabriel's clear warning, Zechariah immediately fulfills the prophecy, because his own attitude towards God is one of disbelief and disobedience, that of a man who needs to be turned toward God by his own as-yet unconceived son. As a result, the angel silences him until he returns to obedience. While John's conception and birth ultimately converts Zechariah, his initial disbelief is in marked contrast to Mary's constant trust in the Lord.

Gabriel appears twice in the Old Testament, both times in Daniel. In every appearance, he explains to the recipient of the message what is to happen and how it is to be accomplished. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus speaks of the angels who always see the face of God. Given Gabriel's words, we may assume he has some part among the angels Jesus described.

Gabriel's initial silence when he appeared to Zechariah near the altar, Zechariah's imposed silence and Elizabeth's decision to hide in silence all show how John's conception foreshadows the Incarnation. God takes flesh silently within the womb of Mary. Interestingly, the public reproach that pregnancy takes away from the barren Elizabeth will be added to the virgin Mary. In the Old Testament, Joseph was the first of only two sons Rachel bore; he was the son who removed her disgrace. He was also the son whom Israel loved above all his other sons, for Joseph was born of the woman he loved most. Likewise, John wipes away Elizabeth's disgrace and highlights the birth of the most beloved son of Israel, Jesus. Even in the wiping away of reproach, his birth has a dual meaning, for not only is Elizabeth's disgrace before men wiped away by the birth of John, but his ministry of preaching repentance will be the beginning of the wiping away of the disgrace of whole peoples.

Questions for study:

1. What is the connection between Elijah and John the Baptist?
2. Read Luke 9:7-8. What do the people think?
3. Consider Luke 9:19 and Matthew 17:3-13. What is the connection between Elijah, John, and Jesus?
4. How does the Catechism use these verses to explain the importance of John?
5. What does this passage tell us about Mary and the Holy Spirit?
6. What is "the communion of saints", and how does this passage demonstrate it?
7. Why is Elizabeth's comment about her son, John the Baptist, both a true statement and a prophecy?