

God breaks the Silence_Luke 1:1-25

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[0 : 00] Today's reading is Luke chapter 1 verses 1 to 25 and that can be found on page 1025 in the Bible.

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

In the time of Herod, king of Judah, there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah.

His wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.

[1 : 32] But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive and they were both very old. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard.

Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth.

For he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.

[2 : 55] He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

Zechariah asked the angel, How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well on in years. The angel said to him, I am Gabriel.

I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he'd seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them, but remained unable to speak.

When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.

[4 : 23] The Lord has done this for me, she said. In these days, he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.

Thanks, Cathy, for reading. If we've not met before, I'm Martin Ayers, the lead pastor here, and it would be a great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open at Luke chapter 1. If they've fallen closed or you hadn't grabbed them, the church Bibles, it's page 1025.

And we're looking at this together. We've been in a series, as lots of you will know, through this term, looking at Luke's Gospel, but we didn't start at chapter 1. We started at chapter 4, so that now in the build-up to Christmas, we're going back to the beginning, and the aim is that therefore, as our hearts prepare to celebrate the gift of Jesus, we're looking at that first Christmas together.

That's the plan. And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet, but it's not right. So if you're someone who likes to take notes, there'll be some scribbling to do as well. The points will come on the screen.

But let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we are so thankful to you for your goodness, your generosity, and we praise you for the gift of your word and your promise that your commands are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

[5 : 46] So we pray to you now, Heavenly Father, that you will open our eyes today, open our ears to hear your voice, and would you enlarge our hearts to know you and to trust you and to follow you where you lead us.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. So we're looking at opening lines today, the opening lines of Luke's gospel. And it's interesting how people choose to start a book or a movie.

So I was looking at famous openings to a movie. Here is one. I don't know if you can guess the movie. The world has changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth.

I smell it in the air. That's from... You don't have to raise your hand. There's someone for the hand up. It's from The Fellowship of the Ring, the first Lord of the Rings movie.

Next one. I believe in America. America has made my fortune. That's from The Godfather. Not a movie recommended by St. Silas Church, but a famous opening line, nonetheless.

[6 : 57] And how people choose to open books is very interesting. So next one, I think is... Oh, no, this is a movie. This is a... Oh, this is good. I owe everything to George Bailey. Help him, dear father.

That's from It's a Wonderful Life. So very festive. And next one is from a book. All children except for one. Grow up. Peter Pan.

Yeah, you got it. And then last one, very obvious. Mr. and Mrs. Dursley of number four Privet Drive. We're proud to say that they were perfectly normal. Thank you very much.

That's from Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. So sometimes an opening line tells us something about what's coming. And Luke's opening to his gospel is especially valuable to us because it tells us his purpose.

And it's a purpose that is so crucial for our times and for us today. I'm reading a book at the moment by a guy called Andy Kind about walking the Pennine Way.

[7 : 58] It's called The Wayfarer. And he's a Christian. And he talks about a friend saying to him, because he's a Christian, why would you put your faith in an old book? That's how his friend asked him about being a Christian.

Why would you put your faith in an old book? Well, first Luke wants us to know that the message of the Bible is one that we can put our trust in firmly because he tells us it's a historical word.

A historical word. Notice there was a great deal of fascination about Jesus. Look at verse one. Luke says, So he wants us to know there were lots of people talking about and even aiming to write about the person and work and words of Jesus.

So for Luke, there were different sources that he was able to draw on to help him get to the truth. And it's still early days as Luke is writing. So notice verse two. Just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

Luke, therefore, wasn't himself an eyewitness from the way he's written that. But as we read Acts, Luke's second volume, from chapter 16 of Acts, just over halfway through, he switches from the third person, speaking about them and him, to the first person.

[9 : 27] We set sail. And he goes on like that because that was the point at which Luke joined the apostolic band as a young Christian on the journey to make Jesus known.

And then Acts ends with Paul in prison in Rome, but not telling us what happened after that. So the best date we can surmise for Luke writing Luke and Acts was the early 60s AD at the latest.

Within 30 years of Jesus' ministry and his death and his resurrection, which is extraordinary when you think about it because it means that if you were to do a poll around, just asking people around Glasgow who they think Jesus is, I would imagine that the most popular answer that people would give, we're seeing from Luke chapter 1, cannot be true, cannot be right.

But most people around us, who do they think Jesus was? They would think, he's a legend. There was probably a real person, like Robin Hood.

There was probably a real person called Jesus. But he was dynamic. He was a great leader. And over the generations, stories started to emerge and get embellished and exaggerated and miracles.

[10 : 50] He's a legend. But the thing about a legend is you can't make up a legend while the eyewitnesses are still alive. Because as you say, well, he did this in this certain place, people who were there can say, well, I was there and that didn't happen.

So Luke is written too early for it to be a legend. Jesus cannot be a legend. And then Luke tells us his way of working, his method in verse 3.

With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account. And then we see why, his purpose.

He says, it's for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. So Theophilus may have been a patron who had given some money so that Luke could be set apart from his medical work as a doctor to have the time to write his gospel.

Or he may have just been a friend who Luke cared for. But what we do see clearly is that his aim is for Theophilus to have certainty about Jesus so that he can really lean his weight on what he's heard about Jesus and build his life on Jesus.

[12 : 08] And if that's the case, it would be rare to find a Christian today who would not greatly benefit from treasuring Luke's gospel. For lots of us, there are times when we would love to have more certainty about the Christian faith.

Maybe that's exactly how you feel today as you come to church. It might be because day by day, God seems to be silent in your life. Prayers don't seem to be answered.

Or it could be that you're struggling with how outnumbered you are among your friendship group at university or in high school or in the workplace, being a Christian.

And faced with, well, everyone else believes such different things, it leaves you struggling. Or maybe you're hearing there's a particular question you struggle with, a particular aspect of the Christian faith, the claim that Jesus is the only way to God.

Or Jesus teaching about sex and marriage that's so countercultural right now here in Glasgow where we live. Well, when we have real struggles to believe that Noah weigh at us, it can be such a shame because it pulls us away from really enjoying the Christian life and really jumping in with both feet, living in wholehearted obedience to God so that we can enjoy knowing God and having hope and purpose and security in life.

[13 : 38] These blessings of the Christian life, we can end up choking them if it just feels too uncertain for us. And Luke here knew that what Theophilus needed was reassurance.

So Luke's gospel can be our companion if we need that as well. Everyone around us in the world lives by faith.

We all live with faith in unprovable things. We believe that science will work because the laws of nature will continue to work in the same way tomorrow as they did today.

We believe in morality and human rights. We believe in beauty and love. These are unprovable things that we live our lives believing in by faith.

And as a Christian, we're being reassured in Luke's gospel, chapter 1, that we're called to live by faith. But it's not blind faith. It's not unreasoned faith.

[14 : 36] It's faith because the word to us is grounded in real events that have been carefully investigated. Eyewitness accounts reliably handed down to us.

It's a historical word. Secondly, the message to us is a supernatural word. We pick things up in verse 5 as Luke gives us these historical, careful details.

In the time of Herod, king of Judah, there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.

So this was a dark time for the people of God. Israel, in its history, got rescued out of slavery, brought into the promised land miraculously. They were unfaithful in the land and they were sent into exile.

Then they were brought back into the land. But since then, it's been hard. These have been afflicted generations. And for over 400 years, there has been no word from God since the Old Testament was closed.

[15 : 45] No prophet has been sent. It's a time of silence. A time that the prophet Isaiah had looked ahead to and said would be the people are living in darkness. It's a time of darkness. But our focus turns to this elderly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, in verse 6.

Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive.

And they were both very old. It shows us that there was still a faithful remnant, a group among the people of God, holding on to his promises and still calling out to him in the silence.

When it says that they were righteous, it doesn't mean that they could perfectly keep God's law. But they were standing in God's grace, holding on to his promises. There was the sacrificial system to give them forgiveness.

And they were right with God. And then we hear about their pain, their childlessness. And even just to pause on that pain will be a hard thing for some of us here in our church.

[16 : 57] Childlessness is like a grief without a focus for it. There's no anniversary for it. But it's a sadness in someone's life for a notness, for the thing that never was, that they would have prayed for over the years, that they would have loved to have had.

But now they're too old for that to be possible. And let's just notice then here that it wasn't anything that they'd done wrong that had brought that into their lives.

As we've just been told, they were blameless. They were righteous people in God's eyes. In our broken world, trials, difficulties, painful things can come to the most faithful people.

That's the reality. And we see that here. And there's a sense here that Elizabeth is really like a picture of what it was like to be faithful Israel at that time.

They were living in a broken world, clinging to God's promises, but with sadness, with affliction. Hope was hard to hold on to. Longing for God to act.

[18 : 06] And then we get to this momentous day in Zechariah's life. There were 24 divisions of priests serving in Israel. So your division only came up to serve in the temple two weeks a year.

They were big weeks in your life. And for Zechariah, he might have thought the day would never come for what happens in verse 9. He was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

He has waited his whole life for this privilege. In his older years, he would presumably have thought, maybe my lot will never come up to do this. And if you got chosen, you were never asked again.

It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. What's going on is that inside the temple, the epicenter of worship for the true and living God and the presence of God for the Old Testament people of God, there was the building itself and the courts.

And then there was the holy place inside. And Zechariah is the one priest who's going to be allowed to enter the holy place.

[19 : 20] All the worshippers are going to be outside that temple building, praying together. And he's the one man who gets to go in. And he burns incense that is a symbol of the prayers of the people of God going up to heaven.

So picture him going on his own for the first time in his long life into the holy place. On his left, as he entered, he would have seen for the first time in his life the golden lampstand with seven lamps that burned continually, filling the room with warm, flickering light.

On his right was a table, and on the table were the twelve loaves of the bread of the presence that symbolized the presence of God among his people, the twelve tribes of Israel.

In front of him is the magnificent curtain that holds back the way to the most holy place that only the high priest can go into one day a year.

And in front of that is the altar burning. And he walks in, and he's carrying a small bowl of incense to place on the glowing coals of the altar so that he can see the cloud of incense go up into the air.

[20 : 33] So it's this holy moment, very special moment. And then astonishingly, we read what happens in verse 11. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

And the angel says, Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. I take it at that point, it's not a prayer for a child anymore. It's a prayer for the restoration of Israel.

That God would act on the promises he's made. But the angel says, Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. And this is wonderful news.

Zechariah being told to call the baby John. John means the Lord is gracious. Grace is God's undeserved generosity. And we see why he's going to be called that.

In what he will be to his parents. Verse 14, he will be a joy and delight to you. And many will rejoice because of his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord.

[21 : 36] And then we see that grace change Elizabeth's life. At the end of our reading, when she gives birth. And the grace from God to her of the baby triumphs over her cultural disgrace.

Disgrace, in verse 25, if you look at that. The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.

So God is breaking in with blessing. And for the Christian to have certainty in our lives that we're not just in what we're putting our faith in.

We're being told here it's not just that we're putting our faith in a historical word. We're putting our faith in the God whom it reveals. A God who was broken into our world.

Because he is the God who was there. And someone like Theophilus, who Luke's writing to, might think, But this seems so implausible. Why would God just turn up out of the blue like this?

[22 : 40] And send a messenger from heaven? So Luke wants us to know with our third point that this is not out of the blue. Our third point is that it's a long expected word. Back up in his opening sentence, did you notice how Luke introduced these events?

He says, These were long promised things that have happened. And Luke gives us confidence by showing us some signposts that this is a key turning point in human history.

The one that God's people have been waiting for that's going to change the world forever. Perhaps the clearest signpost is that Elizabeth was old and she hadn't had children and couldn't bear children.

If you've been reading the Bible from the beginning and you get to this point, And you hear that there's a woman who's old who couldn't have children, You think to yourself, Ah, God may be about to do something huge here.

It points us back to Abraham in Genesis chapter 12. I've just put a table for those who are interested in it about some of the similarities that Luke draws on here To show us that we should be thinking about Abraham and what happened to him.

[23 : 53] In Genesis chapter 12, when we read about Abraham, The whole world was in darkness, Not knowing God, Living under God's curse, In sin and death. And God chooses Abraham and promises to him, He's going to put everything right Through Abraham's offspring.

And the sign is that Abraham and Sarah are elderly and they can't have children. And so God promises that Sarah, Abraham's wife, will have a son, Isaac.

And it's a turning point because God says that he's going to take Abraham And make him the father of a great nation, of many people, And they will live in God's place one day And they'll live under God's blessing of relationship with him.

And all families, all peoples on earth, will be blessed through Abraham's offspring. Now the childlessness here of Elizabeth and Zechariah Also points us to another turning point for the people of God.

Centuries after Abraham, When his descendants have become the great nation, They're living in the promised land, But they don't have a king. And they're not living faithfully.

[25 : 06] And the book of 1 Samuel tells the story of God bringing in a chosen king, An anointed king, a Christ king, King David. And the way that that starts, 1 Samuel, Is it starts with a woman who can't conceive.

And she goes to the tabernacle, So a bit like the temple where Zechariah and Elizabeth are, The equivalent then. And she goes there and she prays. And Eli the priest prays for her as well.

And she conceives and gives birth to a child Who goes on to be a great prophet And prepares the way for Christ David. And so, there are so many echoes here As a child's being born here for Zechariah Who's going to go on to be a great prophet And prepare the way for Christ Jesus, David's greatest son.

There's another big signpost here That God is on the move To do something that will fulfill centuries of promise. And it's in verse 19. If you have a look there.

That the angel said to Zechariah, I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. And I have been sent to speak to you And to tell you this good news. Now, when we hear that it's Gabriel, What do you think?

[26 : 25] I'll tell you what I think. I think, well of course it's Gabriel Because it's Christmas. Yeah? We think Gabriel. We think Christmas. He's the Christmas angel. But Zechariah hears Gabriel And he knows none of that.

He thinks Daniel. We've met Gabriel before. He came to the prophet Daniel. Daniel was in Babylon in the 6th century BC With the people of God in exile.

And Daniel one day Turned towards Jerusalem As a great man of prayer. And he faced Jerusalem Far into the distance. And he prayed That God would restore his people.

And get them out of exile. And take them back. And an angel appears to Daniel. And it's Gabriel. Who we've never seen before. And Gabriel says to Daniel As soon as you began to pray I was sent from heaven to you.

Because you are greatly loved. And he explains to Daniel What needs to happen. And he says God is going to rescue his people. But it's going to take a lot There's going to be a long delay.

[27 : 33] And there's going to be a time of distress. Kingdoms are going to rise and fall. And then The last days are going to come. And in the last days God's going to make atonement For his people's sins.

And how is he going to do that? He says he's going to send His anointed one His Messiah Who will be put to death. So when this angel Identifies himself To Zechariah as Gabriel Zechariah is thinking At last After centuries of silence And darkness And distress That Daniel warned about That Gabriel warned about The night is nearly over The dawn is coming God is going to turn the page He's going to start the new chapter Where his anointed one Comes in the world To rescue his people So Luke wants us to know We've got a historical word We've got a supernatural word The living God breaking in But it's not come from nowhere We shouldn't find it implausible It's a long expected word Fulfilling Doing exactly What God's people Should have been expecting God to do And have been waiting for him to do In sending Jesus

And all of this is important Because our final point today Is that it's a personal word When Gabriel foretells About what John will go on and do What his job will be for God He says It's going to be one that transforms people From the inside out Look at verse 16 He, John Will bring back many of the people of Israel To the Lord their God And he will go on before the Lord In the spirit and power of Elijah To turn the hearts of the parents To their children And the disobedient To the wisdom of the righteous To make ready a people Prepared for the Lord In other words As God's word gets proclaimed By John Wherever people respond in faith They'll turn back to God In their hearts And it will prepare them To be right with God As Jesus comes And we're also told there Aren't we In verse 17 If you noticed That as people turn back to God

It also restores their relationships With other people as well As families are restored And human relationships But the challenge then Is Well as we hear The word How are our hearts Responding And Zechariah Is our case study here Because he's received Wonderful promises From Gabriel But in verse 18 He doesn't believe them Verse 18 Zechariah asked the angel How can I be sure of this I'm an old man And my wife is well on in years The contrast here Is with Mary Who comes next Who believes The angel's message to her So that comes later And Zechariah's question How can I be sure of this It sounds innocent enough But clearly in his heart There was an unbelief An unwillingness to believe And the consequence Is in verse 20 That Gabriel says And now you will be silent And not able to speak Until the day this happens

Because you did not believe my words Which will come true At their appointed time So Zechariah comes out Of the holy place Everyone outside Is waiting for him To dismiss them With a blessing And he can't speak But God is so gracious That if you think about it Even this judgment For his unbelief Is actually Still pointing to the grace of God Because he's saying The child will still be born God is still going to keep his promise Elizabeth will have the baby And Zechariah will be able To speak again then And more than that We read later in Luke's gospel And we're looking tonight At our carol service At the song Zechariah writes At the birth of John That's a prophecy That's one of the greatest songs Ever written All about Jesus coming So God uses Zechariah To explain what Jesus' birth means But here in the temple Zechariah has fluffed his lines When he received God's supernatural word

[31 : 51] As a personal word to him He didn't believe And for us today God's word is a personal word To each of us That invites us To respond personally With trust It's striking that Luke's gospel Starts and ends like that In Luke chapter 1 There's the challenge Of believing in a God Who is a giving life to the dead Kind of God As he promises to Give a baby To an elderly couple And in Luke chapter 24 We're challenged At the end of Luke's gospel To believe in a God Who is a giving life To the dead kind of God Because the tomb is empty And people are seeing Jesus alive again And we're left being told Will you believe this?

So Luke chapter 1 Leaves us asking ourselves How will I respond personally To God's word That's come to me? You might struggle With certainty about that Because in your experience It feels like God is silent Well in Luke chapter 1 Let's think that's exactly How Zechariah and Elizabeth Must have felt For many years of their lives They would have been asking Is God really doing anything at all?

As prayers went unanswered But Gabriel comes and says God has heard your prayer Zechariah We might struggle To have certainty Because we're surrounded By all kinds of competing beliefs Around us People who think it's laughable That we believe the Bible Well that was the world That Theophilus lived in Who Luke writes to A world of pagan religion Where Christians were Scoffed at and oppressed But Luke is saying Have confidence That everything that happened Is historical It's well attested And it was long expected Or we might struggle Because we disagree With God's word We think of an area Of our life Where God's word Is convicting us That we need to change And we don't want To live differently But Luke reminds us here That God's word Is personal for our good To prepare our hearts So that we're right with God And we can know God As our saviour

And if you're here Just looking in On the Christian faith Today as we look At the beginning Of Luke's gospel Helps us see that I think Luke would want To say something like Don't become a Christian Because it's a great adventure Though it is To be a Christian Don't become a Christian Because it gives you Security in life Though it does do that No become a Christian Because it's true God's word to us Is historical It's supernatural It's long expected And it's personal Let's have a moment Of quiet to reflect on What God's been saying To each of us personally A time where perhaps You want to pray In your own mind For renewed confidence From God In his word Or to thank him For his grace And then After a moment of quiet I'll lead us In the Anglican set prayer For today The collect For the second Sunday Of Advent Which is Appropriate For what we've been seeing In Luke 1 Play for a second blessed Lord who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning grant us so to hear them read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them that by patience and the comfort of your holy word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which you have given us in our saviour

Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God forever and ever Amen