

Advent's Unusual Suspects: Herod, Elizabeth and Zechariah¹

Luke 1:1-25

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Back in the 90's a movie came out titled "The Usual Suspects". If you haven't seen it, it is a murder mystery plot twister that leaves the audience wondering what they have seen and who did it until the very end.

The usual suspects turn out to be nothing like we expect them to be, and in this way they are similar to those in the Christmas story.

So if you have your Bibles please open to Luke chapter 1. We are going to spend the next few weeks unpacking Advent's Unusual suspects and we are going to find that God had His plot twist in the works right from the beginning.

As we get started would you pray with me?

[Pray]

Now by far the craziest thing about the Biblical Christmas story is that it actually happened. And this will hit two different kinds of people in different ways. If you've grown up in the church and heard this story a hundred times it will hit you a bit as mundane – of course it happened. But if this is your response, as we get started I'm praying that you will encounter the story afresh in the text this year. This really is a remarkable story.

But if you haven't grown up in the church then the claim that this story actually happened might seem like a bit of a stretch. I mean it's a story about angels and virgins getting pregnant and God putting on human skin. And today it will be a story about senior citizens having babies which I'm sure will cause a few heart palpitations for some of you. But the point is the Christmas story is not a story about rare occurrences – it is a story about impossible, infinitely unlikely events occurring in line with thousand year old prophecies. This is a miracle story.

And as such it is similar to many other world myths. You may know that there are stories of virgin births and gods who walk on water and come back from the dead that pre-date Christ by hundreds or even thousands of years.² And these are stories that people wrote to give their difficult lives meaning.

¹ Outline and some content adapted from Pastor Mark Clark: An Unlikely Tale
<http://www.thisisvillagechurch.com/our-media/sermons/an-unlikely-tale-zechariah-and-elizabeth/>
 (Accessed November 28, 2015)

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miraculous_births

But in spite of the similarities, the difference between all these other myths and the story of the Bible is that Jesus' story is set in history and established as fact. If you look at Greek or Roman or Egyptian mythology the authors make no effort to tie their stories to actual history. They don't expect us to believe these things really happened, but Christianity is different.

Now some of you will know that I'm a big C.S. Lewis fan. He wrote the Chronicles of Narnia, but he was also a professor of medieval literature at Oxford University and he absolutely loved ancient mythology. And he loved these old stories because they were so much more exciting than real life, and yet spoke into the human story giving meaning to things like suffering and pain, and yet everyone knew they weren't true – but that wasn't their point. Their truth came in their being great stories of heroism and sacrifice.

But he had a hard time with Christianity for this very reason. He saw the parallels between our story and the stories of ancient mythology and he felt he had to choose one or the other. He could either enjoy mythology knowing that the stories of the miraculous were not historical, or he could choose Christianity, but if he did then he had to throw out mythology as a lie.

And then one day he went for a walk at Oxford with his friend J.R. Tolkien. And Tolkien explained things in a way Lewis had never thought of before. And a week later he wrote a letter to his friend Arthur Greeves in which he said:

“How deep I am just now beginning to see: for I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ – in Christianity.”³

So what had happened was Tolkien told Lewis that he didn't have to give up his fascination with mythology to come to Christ. He just had to see it for what it was. The great myths are pointers to the True Myth – the story of Jesus. And as such they are like pagan parallels to the Old Testament. The Old Testament points to Jesus and in the same way these myths, while not having the full truth, prepared humanity for the full truth when the real God of creation would actually come to live among people, and actually be born of a virgin, and actually walk on water. And His story would give true meaning to humanity.

And Lewis was convinced and went on to become one of the most well known theologians of the 20th century. He came to see the parallels between the Christian story and others of antiquity not as stumbling blocks, but in fact as fingerprint evidence of God's involvement in His own world. In fact he said if the parallels weren't there that would be a stumbling block.

And so as we come to the Christmas story again and rub up against the miraculous watch for how the Bible works to establish that these events aren't just a great story, but they are a great story that is rooted in history.

³ <http://blog.cslewis.com/lewis-on-tolkien-3/> (Accessed November 28, 2015)

So look with me at Luke chapter 1 verse 1.

[Read Luke 1:1-5a]

Luke is a scholar and a historian and as he writes he is well aware of the parallels between the story he is about to tell and all the other cultural myths that exist and so as he starts to write he makes it clear that this story is different. We can “know with certainty” that the story of Jesus actually happened.

And he grounds this certainty in history. And so he tells us that Herod was king of Judea at this time. And so Herod is the first unusual suspect in this story. Aside from Theophilus that Luke wrote to, Herod is the first guy mentioned in Jesus’ story. Now Luke doesn’t include him because he likes him – he doesn’t.

Herod was a terrible king. He was convinced that his people were out to get him and so instead he went out to get everyone else. He killed one of his wives and two of his own sons. He kept inviting politicians to swim with him in his summer pool and mysteriously they kept drowning. He was a terrible guy!

But he is a historical person and so Luke puts him in here so we can check up on his story and find out when and where these events took place.

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There is a second reason Luke includes Herod in this story and that is because Herod was an Edomite, which is a son of Esau. Now Esau was the twin brother of Jacob, and the patriarch Isaac was their father. And these boys were at war with each other right from the beginning. When Rebeka was giving birth, Esau came out first, but Jacob came out right after holding onto his heel. And they became the heads of two nations. Esau became the first king as it were of Edom, and Jacob became the father of Israel. And these were enemy nations.

And so now in the first century these two kingdoms were at war again, and two kings were wrestling once again. Herod the evil Edomite, a man of abusive power and wealth, found himself pitted against Christ, the righteous Israelite, a man whose kingdom was not of this world and who never once grasped at power or authority though He had it all. And so this story is an epic battle of kings like the best mythology often is.

And right from the beginning Luke is asking us who are you rooting for? Which king do you want to take the throne? If Herod will be your king then your life will be wrought with endless struggles to find meaning in the pleasures of this world, and you will come up ultimately unhappy just as Herod did – always looking for something more and ending up broken. History tells us that Herod died of a chronic kidney disease complicated by a particularly grotesque case of maggot-infested gangrene.⁴

⁴ http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2002/01/0128_020128_KingHerod.html

But if Jesus, the king of hope and peace and joy and love, will take the throne of your life then you will find yourself living in a kingdom that lasts forever.

Now look at verse 5.

[Read Luke 1:5-7]

Some more historical people, but this couple is actually part of the story. In fact they are going to become some of the main characters we are going to look at over the next few weeks. But Luke gives us some details about them that makes them very unlikely candidates or unusual suspects, to be part of Jesus' story. Luke tells us they had been unable to conceive and now were "very old."

Now today people are waiting to have children until their 30's and 40's and so are older than parents used to be, but this isn't what Luke means by "very old."

You could translate this "senior citizen." So he isn't talking about people who are passing the childbearing age, he is talking about people who have ceased even to think about child bearing anymore. So no children were in the works for them period. And that makes them unusual people to be part of God's story.

Now having no kids might not sound significant; I know several couples who aren't planning on having kids and choosing to focus on their careers instead. But in the first century this wasn't the way people thought. Instead if you couldn't have kids people viewed you as being punished for displeasing God. Children were seen as a blessing and they believed that God blessed righteous people.

But then comes the paradox. Luke says "both of them were righteous in the sight of God." And so he shuts down any thought about what some people call the Prosperity Gospel.

Now people still believe in this so called gospel today. They think that if you are righteous then good things happen to you, and if you are not righteous then bad things happen to you – basically karma. And Christians believe this! And it is especially prevalent among healthy, middle class North Americans like ourselves because when life is good we like to think it is because we are good.

But some of you are in the middle of difficulty right now in your personal lives. There is sickness in your family or in your own body, there are extreme financial struggles, there is family disagreement. And you have been doing your best to live for God and yet you're struggling to bear up under this pressure. And people have looked down their noses at you. You don't have enough faith. If you did then life would be better. But this isn't what the Bible says.

Now this doesn't mean there aren't consequences for our actions. I've used this illustration before, but if you drive recklessly through a red light the consequence of your actions may be you have to buy a new car, but the punishment of your actions will be that a police officer will give you a ticket for reckless driving.

And similarly if you buy into the world's lie that happiness is found in new stuff and go out and rack up huge credit card debt at Christmas you will have to pay it off in the New Year. But the struggle to make those payments won't be punishment from God it will be the consequence of buying into the world's lie. This means a lot, but not all, of the financial difficulties we experience in Canada are brought on by ourselves. They aren't punishment; they are just consequences for foolish living.

Or sometimes at Christmas we over eat or eat unhealthily... who am I kidding, we almost always overeat and eat unhealthily, and some of us will struggle with our weight or our blood pressure as a result of this. Now this isn't God's punishment, it is the simple consequence for our foolish actions.

So consequences and punishment are not the same thing. And this text does not say that our actions don't have consequences, but it does say that the difficulty we experience in life often has nothing to do with God's being pleased with us or not.

So Zechariah and Elizabeth were both obediently righteous and shamefully childless. This combination destroys the Prosperity Gospel. This means if you are rich and healthy it has nothing to do with God blessing you, and if you are sick and poor it has nothing to do with God punishing you.

But this does raise the question "how are we supposed to live when bad things happen to us? If they aren't punishment, how are we supposed to treat difficulty?

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Last week we looked at James chapter 1 which said:

Consider it pure joy my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. (James 1:2)

So that means first, don't blame God when bad things happen. God isn't punishing you. Instead choose to look at disappointment or difficulty as a path to Christ-likeness.

And this is what happened to Jesus. Jesus was of course the most righteous person to ever live, and yet we read in Mark that after He was baptized:

The Spirit immediately drove Him out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended Him. (Mark 1:11-13)

So God's will for Jesus was that He experience difficulty to overcome the devil. And so if our greatest desire is to honour God then we need to actually be excited about these opportunities when they arise – we need to consider it pure joy when we face trials.

And Zechariah and Elizabeth lived this way. They didn't blame God for their situation; they were righteous and obedient and continued to seek Him in the midst of their difficulty and God showed up. Look at verse 8.

[Read Luke 1:8-14]

So Zechariah and Elizabeth are people of prayer. And the Angel says "God has heard your prayer and is responding." Wow!

Now prayer is an interesting thing. It is a physical action we do that has a direct connection to the level of faith we possess. So people without faith don't pray while people with faith do, and people with great faith pray a lot. And this connection between faith and prayer is profound.

So here is a test you can do to see how much faith you have; how much you believe in God: Simply add up how much you pray by yourself. Public prayer is different because we can pray to impress people. But private prayer is for nobody but God and ourselves.

Now statistically North American Christians pray very little. We pray before our meals, many of us read the Bible and pray, some of us pray before bed. But if you add up all the time the average Christian spends actually talking with God it usually amounts to less than 10 minutes a day.

And while there is no rule in Scripture about how much Christians should pray; prayer is a thermometer of faith.

So if you want to know how much faith you have add up how many minutes you pray every day. And here is why this works: to pray means to invest effort into something that, if God doesn't exist, is an absolute waste of time. On the other hand when we pray and invest time and energy into it, then we are acting in faith that God does exist and does reward those who earnestly seek Him.⁵

So faith and prayer are like the chicken and the egg question. One always comes before the other but you can never know which one it is. But the more of one you have automatically increases the other.

⁵ Hebrews 11:6

So I want to encourage you to look at your faith life right now. Are you content with how much faith you have? Are you living in a way that doesn't make sense to someone without faith? If yes, great. If no, then choose to make a change to your prayer life that will increase it.

So set your alarm and get up early in order to have time to pray – sacrifice sleep to grow your faith. Or come out to our Tuesday morning prayer meeting at the church. The more you pray the bigger your faith will get, because you will be exercising your faith muscle, you will be investing into your belief in God and His promise that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.

And Zechariah and Elizabeth were people of faith evidenced by the fact that they prayed, and God heard their prayer and changed their reality – God hears when we pray. Look at verse 14.

[Read Luke 1:14-17]

This of course is describing character traits that are going to make John bring joy and delight to his parents, and some of these things we can aspire to as well. So there are three traits from this list that I would like to highlight for you.

First, verse 15, John's going to be great in the sight of the Lord. That's something to aspire to. He's not good, he's not mediocre. God thinks he is great. So is this something you are aiming for? Don't settle for mediocrity, don't just try to survive in your faith, shoot for the "well done."

Second, Luke says and He's going to be filled with the Holy Spirit from before birth. Now the before birth part is unique, but it is the fullness of the Spirit that is significant for us. Now all Christians get the Spirit, but not equally. Some people are full of Him in a way that is visible to those around and others bump along hardly having any of His presence evident in their lives at all.

So perhaps you are wondering why don't I feel on fire for God. Or why don't I have the power to defeat temptation? Or why do I find myself doing the same sins over and over again? These are traits of people who aren't full of the Holy Spirit.

It's just like how God is present everywhere, but He tells us He is especially present when two or three gather in His name.⁶ So Luke gives us the picture that there are different levels of being filled with the Holy Spirit. And the more of the Jesus' Spirit we have coursing through our bodies the more we are going to think and act like Jesus and have the power to live like Jesus. So desire this!

⁶ Matthew 18:20

Now obviously God is the one who gives the Spirit and so we need to ask Him for more of It – we need to earnestly seek Him. Jesus said:

If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"
(Luke 11:13)

So are you asking? Here we come back to prayer. And Jesus says, do it, and do more of it. And God will answer. God will fill you with My Spirit if you ask for it.

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The third trait I want to bring out is the impact John is going to have on his culture. He is going to bring many of the people of Israel back to God.

Now this is interesting. Remember the people of Israel were God's people, but here John is going to bring them back to God. This means in spite of the fact that they knew lots about God they weren't in a right relationship with Him. And the obvious parallel is that there are people in the church that need to be brought back to God.

And perhaps this is you this morning. You have been here forever, perhaps for decades, but your heart isn't actually connected with Christ's. So during the week you aren't driven by a sense of "how can I live in a way that honours Jesus? How can I spend my money in a way that pleases Jesus? What can I do with my time that will make Jesus happy?"

These aren't idealistic questions that only radical Christians ask. The fact is if you aren't driven by a desire to please God then you need to be brought back to Him regardless of how long you may have been serving in His church.

Let's keep going. Look at verse 18

[Read Luke 1:18-22]

So Zechariah finds himself talking with an angel, and he doubts. Now even in his doubt Zechariah demonstrates his wisdom. Look how he describes himself. He says "I'm old." But then he is a lot more politically correct when describing Elizabeth. So he says and "my wife is well along in years" or "advanced in years." I'm old but she is advanced – there's good advice here men.

But he doubts. He is talking to an angel and he doubts. Now perhaps you are thinking, if only God would talk to me like this then I would do anything He says no matter what it was. But before we are too hard on Zechariah the Scriptures teach that actually if we aren't living for God without the miraculous in our lives, then the miraculous won't change us.

So once Jesus told a story about a Rich Man and Lazarus. And when Lazarus died he went to heaven, but when the rich man died he went to hell. And he called out to Abraham and said send someone back from the dead to warn my brothers, they will believe someone who came back from the dead. But Abraham said:

If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead. (Luke 16:30)

And so Gabriel says, I stand in the very presence of God and I've been sent to tell you this good news, And he decides Zechariah is going to get himself into more trouble if he keeps talking so he shuts him up. And Zechariah went mute for about a year. Now don't pray for this miracle for someone special in your life, this was just Zechariah.

Anyway, look down at verse 23

[Read Luke 1:23-25]

Now Elizabeth stays in seclusion to hide what is happening in her belly until it is totally obvious. And she hides because of the shame she has lived under. People always assumed she was sinful and hated by God. She'd been abused. And some of you have lived out this experience. But the Christmas story is God's message that He wants to set you free from bondage and bring you joy.

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To wrap this up, perhaps there are some here like Zechariah and you have been skeptical and you need to repent. Perhaps you've never really believed and now there is a spark of faith in your heart. I want to encourage you to repent, let Jesus take your sin away and give you a believing heart.

Perhaps you have been in church forever, but this morning you recognize that your lack of prayer shows that you lack faith, and you never saw it this way before, but now you realize you need to repent and put some work into developing your faith – find a way to give yourself to more prayer.

And perhaps some of you are like Elizabeth this morning. You've been hurt by the church and by Christians. You've been shamed because you aren't like everyone else. And you need to hear that the message of the Gospel is that regardless of what people think God came to take away your shame and make you clean.

So wherever you are today choose to open your ears to God's True Myth – the miraculous Christmas story. It's an epic adventure that speaks meaning into the very life we find ourselves living, and it's a story that is grounded in history.