

Guide to St. Luke Part 1:

Luke 1:1-4:13

Introduction, Infancy Narratives, and Preparation for Ministry

Introduction: Luke 1:1-4

Luke's community has already heard about Jesus in *oral* preaching. With this Gospel, he is giving them an accurate and orderly *written* narrative of events to assure them of the certainty of what they have been taught. They will use the Gospel when they gather to worship. Most importantly, they will preserve it and hand it down to us.

The Infancy Narratives: Luke 1:5-2:52

Who is Jesus Christ? We answer similar questions today with a lot of facts and figures. Luke provides an introductory answer in a way that is both comprehensive and meaningful to his audience by way of the Infancy Narratives.

He begins with the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist. Elizabeth, though old and thought to be barren, will bear a son who will be a prophet like Elijah and prepare the people to receive salvation. This act of God, announced by an angel, will remind Luke's audience of similar acts of God in the Scriptures (our Old Testament): Sarah has Isaac as a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham (Gen 21:1). Hannah has Samuel in answer to her prayers (1Sam 1:20). (Samuel will anoint David as King, by the way.)

The same angel, Gabriel, brings a similar but more profound message to Mary, betrothed to Joseph, of the House of David. She will bear a son named Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit as Son of the Most High. He will inherit the throne of David. Mary, as a supreme act of faith, accepts the will of God.

These two parallel stories begin the bridge that Luke builds between the Old Covenant of the Jewish Scriptures and the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. The stories relate how Jesus was presented as the fulfillment of God's promise to send a Messiah even before he was born. John's preparatory role is also seen as fulfillment of Scripture.

The connection with the Old Testament continues as Mary visits Elizabeth who recognizes the blessing that Mary has received. Mary responds in the great canticle (song) of praise, known as the Magnificat, which reminds readers of the great things God has done for Israel as recounted in the Scriptures.

A second set of parallel stories follow which describe the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. John's birth is followed by another great song praising the God of Israel, the canticle of Zechariah. The birth of Jesus, which begins chapter 2, is a story we are

familiar with. Read it carefully. We often merge the birth stories of Matthew and Luke. While they have all the significant elements in common, both tell the story in their own distinct way. There is a great deal of symbolism in Luke's birth story that is meaningful to his community: Jesus is born in Bethlehem, "the city of David;" the angel of the Lord *proclaimed the good news* (this anticipates the Church's *proclamation of the gospel*); shepherds are involved (David was a shepherd, Jesus, the Great Shepherd); the child is lying in a manger (a feeding trough for animals, suggesting his role as "the bread of life").

Luke moves on to an account of Jesus' presentation in the Temple, an occasion for the third great song of praise, the canticle of Simeon, a devout man who had been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would live to see the Messiah. In thanking and praising God, Simeon indicates a theme that runs through Luke: the Messiah will offer salvation not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. Luke concludes the Infancy Narratives by telling the story of the 12 year old Jesus, on a Passover trip to Jerusalem, being accidentally left behind. His parents find him discussing religious questions "in my Father's house" - the Temple.

With the Infancy narratives, Luke answers the question "*Who is Jesus Christ?*" in a very comprehensive manner in a way that is meaningful to a primarily Gentile audience familiar with the Jewish Scriptures. Luke has located Jesus historically in time and place with well-known figures in the larger Roman world like Herod and Caesar Augustus. Jesus is not a myth. Connections are made between Jesus, Old Testament prophecy and the long awaited Messiah of the House of David. Finally Jesus is presented in such a way as to foreshadow his offer of salvation to Gentiles as well as to the Jews. Luke is able to do all this by combining history and story in the Infancy Narratives in a way that *interprets* historical events as well as earlier Scripture. Matthew will combine the same basic historical events in a slightly different story in order to make it more meaningful to his audience of Jewish Christians. Though the stories of Luke and Matthew may differ in some details, they both are "true" answers to, "*Who is Jesus Christ?*"

I'd like to point out how profoundly the Infancy Narratives in Luke affect our spiritual life as Catholics: These stories give us the five "Joyful Mysteries" of the Rosary (the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Birth of Jesus, the Presentation and Finding the Child Jesus in the Temple). The Canticles of Mary (the Magnificat), Zechariah, and Simeon are respectively, the evening, morning, and night prayers of the Liturgy of the Hours. Finally, the hymn of the angels, "*Glory to God in the Highest,*" is the beginning of the *Gloria* we use at Mass.

Preparation for Ministry: Luke 3:1-4:15

Luke now jumps ahead to relate the beginning of the adult ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. Their stories are again told in parallel. Notice also that Luke begins with a detailed reference to well-known historical benchmarks: the "fifteenth year" of Tiberius Caesar, and the offices held by Pilate, Herod, his brother Philip, Caiaphas, etc. He is again emphasizing that he is presenting history not myth.

The ministry of John the Baptist begins with a proclamation from the book of the prophet Isaiah. With it, John accepts his prophetic role of announcing the coming of the Lord, who will bring salvation.

The ministry of Jesus begins with his baptism, the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the divine announcement, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” This is followed by the genealogy of Jesus, which is another opportunity to answer the question, “*Who is Jesus Christ?*” The genealogy, unusually, works backward tracing Jesus’ lineage through David and Abraham to Adam and ultimately to God. This reinforces Luke’s emphasis on the universality of Jesus’s message and his divine sonship.

After his Baptism in the Jordan River, Jesus “was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days, to be tempted by the devil.” This short scene is filled with much symbolism. It would remind Luke’s readers of the forty years of wandering in the desert by the Israelites after the exodus from Egypt. That was recognized as a time of preparation to enter the “Promised Land.” In Jesus’s time, the “desert” was thought of differently than we think of it today. It was a place Prophets went when they were in danger. It was a place for retreat and renewal for those who wanted to be closer to and more dependent on God. People came out to the desert to learn from holy ones like John the Baptist. And the desert was not that far away: less than 25 miles from Nazareth or Jerusalem.

Notice how Jesus answers the first two temptations of the devil with quotations from Scripture and how the devil uses Scripture to present the third temptation. In every case Jesus expresses complete, unqualified obedience to God. He is ready to begin his ministry in Galilee.

Questions for reflection

1. Do you understand the birth of Jesus differently now that Luke’s and Matthew’s accounts have been untangled?
2. Can interpreted history express the “truth” in a more comprehensive way than a history made of facts and dates? Is any historical presentation ever *not* interpreted?
3. Why was it important for the Old Testament to prepare Luke’s community for Christ? Is it important for us?
4. Why are Luke’s and Matthew’s Gospels different? How can differences in the Gospels benefit us?
5. How is Jesus like us? How is he different?

S. Csontos, 13 Feb 2013.