

Songs for a Saviour's Sunrise

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[0 : 00] I'm going to ask you now, if you would, to turn in your Bibles to the beginning of Luke's Gospel, Chapter 1. If you have one of our church visitors' Bibles, I think it's page 855. And we've just begun, last week, a new series in Luke's Gospel.

Last week we were introducing ourselves, really, to Luke and his writing. This morning we're going to look at the whole of Luke, Chapter 1. We're very familiar with these stories from readings at Christmastime.

But rather than spend weeks and weeks and weeks on these readings and then find ourselves at Christmastime and thinking about all these things again, we're going to go much quicker through these earlier chapters and try and get a sense of the flow of the way Luke actually wrote this.

He didn't really write this to be chopped up for Christmas carol services, although that is a good thing to do. He assumed that we would read right through this story. And so sometimes looking at larger sections helps us much more with that.

So we're going to read this morning the whole of Luke, Chapter 1. We'll have a break halfway through at verse 55 and sing and then come back to read the rest of the chapter. But we'll begin now at Luke, Chapter 1, at verse 1.

[1 : 09] Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished or fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers, servants of the word, have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

And that's our title for the whole of our series, Our Certain Salvation. In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah of the division of Abijah.

He had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Now, while he was serving as a priest before God, when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lots to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.

[2 : 35] But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. And your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink.

And he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

And Zechariah said to the angel, How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife has advanced in years. And the angel answered him, I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God.

And I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.

[3 : 50] And the people were waiting for Zechariah. And they were wondering, amazed at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them.

And they realized that he'd seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After these days, his wife Elizabeth conceived. And for five months, she kept herself hidden, saying, Thus, the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked upon me to take away my reproach among people.

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David.

And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you. But she was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

[4 : 50] And the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive and in your womb bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

He 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 father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. And of his kingdom there will be no end.

And Mary said to the angel, How will this be, since I'm a virgin? The 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 called Holy, the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age also has conceived a son. And this is the sixth month with her who was called barren, for nothing will be impossible with God.

And Mary said, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her.

[5 : 59] In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country to a town in Judah. And she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leapt in her womb.

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she exclaimed with a loud cry, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.

And Mary said, My soul magnifies the Lord. And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. Behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed.

For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

[7 : 06] He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home. Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.

And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child.

And they would have called him Zechariah after his father. But his mother answered, No, he shall be called John. And they said to her, None of your relatives is called by this name.

[8 : 11] And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, His name is John.

And they all marveled, wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened, and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, Blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors.

And all these things were talked about throughout all the hill country of Judea. And all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What then will this child be?

For the hand of the Lord was with him. And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to show the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, having been delivered from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

[10 : 03] And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. Amen. May God bless to us. This is his word.

Well, do turn with me, if you would, to Luke's Gospel, chapter 1, page 855, if you have one of the church Bibles. Luke tells us in his opening verses that we saw last week that he has written a carefully ordered account in his book for Theophilus and his contemporaries who were his first readers.

And that means that recognizing his order will be very important if we're going to understand his message, because it helps to form his message and communicate that message to us.

So as you read through Luke's Gospel, or for that matter, any other book of the Bible, it's always useful to remember these four C's. First, choice. Why has this material been included by Luke?

Secondly, concerns. What is this material meant to convey to us? And thirdly, construction. How does it put the message across?

[11 : 20] These things will help us to understand Luke's communication, what he is actually saying to us. And if we look at the big picture of Luke's Gospel as a whole, we'll see that Luke's story falls naturally into two very major movements.

Nearly all the scholars recognize that. I have found one book by David Gooding, according to Luke, extremely helpful. And he simply calls these two parts the coming and the going.

The coming of the Lord from heaven to earth, and the going of the Lord back from earth to heaven. And I would echo that, and I would put it this way. From the beginning of the Gospel up to the great turning point, at chapter 9, verse 51, we have the revelation of glory from heaven.

We have the Lord of heaven bringing down the salvation of his kingdom to humans. And it's all about the coming of the Messiah to God's ancient people of old, to Israel.

And then from chapter 9, verse 51, where we read that, when the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. We have the road to glory in heaven.

[12 : 30] That is, the Lord of heaven is leading men up to his heavenly kingdom and to salvation. And it's all about the implications of Jesus' coming, the implications for Christ himself, and, crucially, for all of those who will follow him.

And so in that section, we have all Jesus' teaching. A lot of it is unique to Luke's Gospel. And again and again, we're told that they were on the road to Jerusalem, on the road to glory.

It's all about what it means to be following Jesus to the glory of his kingdom. Well, that is Luke's big picture. And his careful ordering is evident even from the very first chapters of the book, because chapter 1 and 2 echo that shape in miniature.

I think they're rather like an overture to the Gospel. They introduce the key repeating melodies, the tunes that you hear all the way through, just as an overture does in an opera.

I don't know if you're opera fans, but think of Les Miserables. I guess most of you have seen that. If you've not seen it at the theater, you've seen it in the film. And in the beginning of that, you get a medley of all the tunes that are going to come throughout the whole of the rest of the musical.

[13 : 44] So when they come, you think, oh, I know that tune. I've heard it before. And that's just so here. We're so used, aren't we, to each of these individual stories from readings at Christmastime.

But in fact, these first two chapters are very carefully arranged. And the material that Luke has has very specific concerns, and he has chosen it and constructed it to communicate a very particular message to us.

If you look through and read this later on this afternoon or this week, I encourage you to, if you read through the two chapters, you'll see that there are ten separate episodes he records, five in each chapter. And they're very carefully arranged.

The first story in chapter one, and the last story in chapter two, is situated in the temple. It begins, the first story, with an old priest, Zechariah, who's in the temple, and is totally out of his depth of what's going on.

It ends with a young boy, Jesus, age 12, in the temple, absolutely at home and in charge of everything. Is that an accident? Of course not. And between these stories, you have four pairs of episodes in a kind of mirror image pattern that's center, the end of chapter one and the beginning of chapter two, on the birth of John and its implications, and the birth of Jesus and its significance.

[15 : 07] And there are further clear markers. You'll notice the very last verse of chapter one, verse 80, and the very last verse of chapter two, verse 54, are almost identical summaries of everything that follows.

Chapter one, verse 80, and the child, John, grew and became strong in spirit. Chapter two, verse 54, and Jesus increased in wisdom and stature in favor with God and men.

Now, Luke didn't have a word processor. He didn't have bold or italic fonts or things like that. He didn't use alliteration. But we can't miss the careful ordering of his message.

It was something very typical of ancient writers and ancient historians. It's what they did to draw deliberate attention from their readers as to what they wanted them to be considering and thinking about, just as we do today with having headings and structure in a book or in a talk.

By asking the question, what is Luke telling us by writing this way? Well, we're starting to ponder Luke's interpretation of the events that he is recording.

[16 : 17] It's not just random. The things he tells us are certainly telling a story. They are historical. Of course they are. But they also are interpreting that story for us.

And that's the way it is here because Luke has constructed these first two chapters to give us, by way of an overture to his gospel, a foreshadowing in miniature of the whole of his message.

The emphasis and the movement in the stories in chapter one echo and foreshadow the whole story of the first half of the gospel, the revelation of God's glory from heaven to earth in the coming of the Savior.

That's what we'll see throughout the whole first half of the gospel. It's about light shining at last in the darkness. And it's about the joy that comes when darkness gives way to dawn in the sunrise of God's promised salvation.

That's why I'm saying it's a chapter full of songs for the Savior's sunrise. But chapter two, as we'll see next time, introduces even amid the joy of the Savior's birth, the shadows of the Savior's suffering.

[17 : 29] And its stories unfold. And we're told about Mary's reflection on these events, from the amazement and the wonder of what the shepherds first tell her, to the impending sorrow that's foretold by Simeon.

He speaks of the sword that will pierce her own soul also. And then the anxiety and the foreboding of the last story, when even at the age of 12, she begins to realize that her son has a destiny that is at last going to take him away from her.

So that he's about his father's business, concerns of his father's house, his father in heaven. So you see, from the very start of this book, the joy of the revelation of his saving glory and the pain of the road to the Savior's glory are inseparable.

The cradle and the cross are together, right from the very start. And Luke wants to plant both of these melodies in our minds. The one brimming with joy, the other burdened with sorrow.

So that as we read through his stories, we grasp more and more of the surpassing joy and more and more of the terrible cost of our certain salvation through Jesus our Lord.

[18 : 52] Well then, with that by way of introduction, let's look at the whole sweep of Luke chapter 1, which I'm going to call Songs for a Savior's Sunrise, because it is a chapter so marked, isn't it, by the joyful singing of Elizabeth and Mary.

And it climaxes, as we saw, with the great song of Zechariah, the Benedictus. And we will come back, I think, to some of these songs in more detail when we do get to Christmastime. But I want to get a sense of Luke's big picture here and his flow.

You remember that I said last week that one of Luke's really big concerns is that he wants us to have absolute certainty. And one of the things he wants us to have certainty about, you remember, is God's Word in Scripture.

What God promises, he always accomplishes. What God plans and he purposes must, remember that famous word that comes all the way through Luke's Gospel, it must be fulfilled.

And we will see that again and again and again. And therefore, because of that, no one should find themselves on the wrong side of history, seeking to oppose God's eternal plan, which is made known uniquely and forever and ultimately in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

[20 : 13] Because in that way of opposing that message lies only disaster. The way of blessing is the way of submission to believe and to obey the good news of Jesus.

And to become what Luke says in chapter 1, verse 2, what he calls ministers, servants of the Word of God. Well, chapter 1 gives us a prasy of the first half of Luke's Gospel in miniature, as it were.

And we will see in this chapter the good news of Jesus Christ being met first with rejection by the honored priest of Israel, and then by others with rejoicing by the humble peasants, Elizabeth and Mary.

And finally, with repentance by Zechariah, now the happy parent. Look at the first story in verses 5 to 25. Luke shows us here the good news of the Savior being met with rejection.

We're introduced to Zechariah, the honored priest of Israel. But he meets God's Word with rejection, and the result is silence. The good news of Jesus is silenced in the very temple of God.

[21 : 26] Now, Zechariah is sadly a representative in this Gospel of the religious establishment, and we will see all through the Gospel they are resisting the message and the ministry of Jesus.

So that as a result, as Jesus says later on in chapter 11, Woe to you! Woe to you, for you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and worse still, you even hindered those who were entering the kingdom.

And alas, we have to say that to a very great extent that has been the story of the religious establishment, not only in Israel, but in the Christian church from Jesus' day right through to the present.

Because where God's living Word is met with rejection by those whose responsibility particularly is to cherish that Word and proclaim that Word, then what happens is that the life-giving Gospel is silenced in the church.

There's no doubt, is there, where Luke's emphasis is amongst all the careful historical details of this story. It tells us about Herod's reign, it tells us exactly which division of the priesthood Zechariah was part of, and that's important.

[22 : 41] It shows us, doesn't it, this is not just a fairy tale. It's rooted in verifiable history. But why does Luke choose to tell us all of these things? Mark doesn't, neither does Matthew.

As far as John the Baptist is concerned, they just start with John the Baptist's public ministry. Well, Luke's climax to the story, I think, is self-evident. Look at verses 19 and 20.

Gabriel comes from the very presence of God himself to bring good news, to bring the Gospel from heaven to the most favored religious man in all Israel.

Don't miss that. Zechariah was one of about 18,000 priests who did a rota serving at the temple. But the scholars tell us that only once, once in his entire life would he have been chosen for that privilege of offering the incense that represented the prayers of the entire nation of Israel in the holy place of the temple.

So God comes to this most favored priest of the whole of Israel and he comes to bring good news of joy that these prayers that he has been offering on behalf of the whole nation of Israel that they have been answered at last and that the redemption that they longed for, the comfort that they looked for, the rescue, the salvation, the day of the Lord that they prayed incessantly for, that it was going to come.

[24 : 07] And verse 20, Israel's honored priest representing all the people of the nation did not believe God's words of wonderful good news.

He met God's gospel with rejection. Ever since Israel's exile in Babylon, even after the return from exile about 500 years previously, ever since then, Israel had been praying and praying for a full end to their exile in judgment.

Yes, they'd come back, they'd rebuilt the temple, they had their city, but they'd never again been a free people. They'd never yet had their own king again. They'd never had the fulfillment of all that the prophets had promised that the Messiah king would at last come and establish his kingdom forever.

And so Zechariah in that temple that day would have been voicing the prayers of a people who were waiting still for the real consolation of Israel, who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

You'll see in chapter 2, that's the very things we're told of Simeon and Anna. He'd have been repeating the prayer of Daniel, the prophet, for many years before. Make your face, O Lord, to shine on your sanctuary.

[25 : 19] Open your eyes and see our desolateness and the city called by your name in ruins. The city still ruled by pagan Romans. O Lord, hear.

O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not for your sake, O Lord, because your city and your people are called by your name. Maybe Zechariah was even using Daniel's very words from the book of Daniel, those words I've read.

And then suddenly, just in fact as it happened with Daniel, Gabriel, the angel, appears and says, your prayer has been heard and answered. And Zechariah didn't believe it.

Gabriel had told Daniel, remember, in Daniel chapter 9 and all those cryptic visions that the 70 years that he thought must pass of exile before the people would return was going to be extended seven times.

There would be 70 weeks of years before the anointed one would come, the great prince of peace, because of their sin, because of their rebellion. It was not going to happen for 70 times seven years.

[26 : 29] But at last, he would come and he would put an end to sacrifice and offering and he would be the great Messiah king. If you read those chapters later on, you'll see that Daniel was desolate at the thought of such a long, long, long time of darkness before God's salvation would dawn.

But God said to him to wait and to trust and to pray because God had promised and that day would at last come. Likewise, Malachi and all the other prophets, Malachi, the very last prophet of the Old Testament, he spoke, didn't he, of the great and awesome day of the Lord that would come and before it, he said, there will be another Elijah who will come and turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and turn the people to repentance.

And he promised that for those who fear my name, the son of righteousness will rise with healing in his wings. Look at what Gabriel is saying to Zechariah here in verses 13 to 17.

Do you see? He is saying everything that Malachi spoke of, all that the prophet spoke of, has come. Your prayer has been answered. 500 years later, yes, but the day of joy is now at last here.

And Zechariah, the honored priest of Israel, does not believe it. But he's been praying for this very thing. But he spent his life teaching the people, it would seem, about this very thing.

[28 : 10] He cannot actually believe it when God shows himself to be real and actually doing something in front of his very eyes. It can't possibly be that Zechariah was ignorant.

He, of all people, would recognize instantly the impact of these words. He would grasp immediately for one thing the significance of Gabriel. The only other time in the whole Bible Gabriel is named is in that prayer to Daniel when he comes to tell him about the Messiah, the anointed one, the prince of peace who will come.

So Zechariah knew all of that in his head. He knew all about the Bible. But somehow when the reality of a living message, an actual encounter with supernatural power reached out and touched his life, somehow the intrusion of the gospel upon his life was met with resistance.

He did not believe God's word of good news. And so we're told he was judged with dumbness. How ironic, how terrible, that when the living gospel came to the very heart of God's temple, to God's own house, and when it came to the priest to proclaim it to God's people, it was the one who was set apart for that very message, who silenced the message by his own unbelief.

But tragically, that is a pattern that we will see all through Luke's gospel. Jesus wept over Jerusalem and its temple because the living wonder of his presence, he says, was hid from its eyes.

[29 : 51] And judgment would come upon it, he said, because it did not know the time of its visitation. It's a salutary thing, isn't it?

When you read the New Testament, just how often religion is warned against, religion that, Jude says, is devoid of the Spirit, or as Paul says, as a form of godliness, but denying its power.

No doubt, Zechariah had theological degrees and PhDs in abundance, not to mention the highest ecclesiastical office. But at the end of the day, the end of this story, God has silenced him because he didn't believe the true gospel because his heart resisted the saving truth about Jesus.

And to him, we mustn't be too unfair. Verse 6, if you see it, tells us that he was a righteous man with his wife. He was blamelessly walking in all the commands.

There's nothing critical in that. That is simply describing a genuine Israelite believer. He was not a heretic. He was an orthodox, pious Jew.

[31 : 01] He was a good man. But when he was confronted personally by the living joy of the good news, he was exposed somehow. Somehow his devotion to religion had prevented him from receiving the joy of a living relationship with a saving God and the good news of the gospel.

And that tells us, doesn't it, that there's a danger even in pious orthodoxy that it can have a power to quench real and living faith, to kill it absolutely dead.

I remember Tom Swanson, formerly a pastor in Inverness, saying that there's no difference between a heterodox corpse and an orthodox corpse. Both are dead and both stink to high heaven.

That's why Jesus warned, isn't it, repeatedly, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees. the hypocrisy of what appears on the outside to be very sound and very orthodox and very good, but is exposed when it's met with the real pulse of the goodness of God in saving men and women.

Like the church where long-standing members complain, there's no seats for us anymore where we like to sit because there's so many new people who have come to faith and joined our church.

[32 : 25] It happens. Or like the very sound churchman complaining to a famous evangelist of the last century when he was turning thousands and thousands to Christ and they said, we do not like your methods of evangelism.

You're unsound. And his reply was, well, my method may have many faults, I grant, but sir, I prefer the faulty methods of the evangelism I am doing to the faultless methods of the evangelism you are not doing.

Beware religion that is devoid of the spirit. Well, God's verdict on Zechariah's unbelief is very clear.

Verse 20, he was judged, he was silenced for his unbelief. He couldn't speak, verse 22. And yet, do you see verse 24? God showed Zechariah how wrong he was to disbelieve in a very wonderful way.

his wife conceived just as he'd been told. And the wife of the honored priest at least burst forth into praise and rejoicing. And that leads, of course, into the second cameo of the reception of the good news of the Savior that we see in verses 26 to 56.

[33 : 42] Because here we see the good news of the Savior being met with rejoicing. We see Mary and Elizabeth, humble peasants of Israel, but meeting God's word with great rejoicing.

And the result is song. God's word is sung to him in marvelous praise. And once again, we see Luke's interest in recording history accurately and truthfully.

He dates everything for us here. Verse 26, it was the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. He gives details and so on. And again, these happenings are not recorded for us in the other Gospels.

Luke has done it for a purpose. These happenings here are not now in the heart and the center of national life in Jerusalem and in the temple. They're up in an unimportant, unheard of place up in Galilee of the Gentiles.

And yet, what we have here is almost an identical pattern, isn't it? A mighty angel appears, Gabriel, same message, do not be afraid and the announcement of another extraordinary birth and a child again with a special name fraught with destiny.

[34 : 55] And once again, verse 35, it's all the power of the Holy Spirit. And yet, this birth is not going to be just extraordinary, it's going to be unique. It's not just a conception to an old past it couple, it's a conception to an impossible mother, a virgin, a young teenage peasant girl, Mary.

And yet, he is told, she is told that he will be none other than the son of David, the promised Messiah king, the son of God himself. Well, if Zechariah's, if Gabriel's words to Zechariah were incredible, how much more incredible are these words to Mary, to someone who's a humble peasant girl just in her teens.

But again, look at Luke's focus. All his focus is on the reaction to this extraordinary gospel word. And the contrast is absolute, isn't it?

You might look at first as though Mary responds rather like Zechariah in verse 34 when she says, well, how will this be? But in fact, her response could not have been more different.

Not wrong to ask questions of the scriptures. Not wrong to search the scriptures. Of course it isn't. But it all depends on your attitude of heart as you do that.

[36 : 22] Zechariah's attitude was clearly one of unbelief, one of resistance to God. Mary's attitude was one of faith seeking further understanding. She's here not to be an example to us of blind faith, but she is an example of humble, believing, questioning.

And that kind of honest inquiry is something that God always, always rewards with evidence and assurance. Now Mary asks us because she was not a fool.

She knew that virgins did not conceive. That is not exactly rocket science. And the angel says to her, yes, that's right, Mary. But this will not be natural, but supernatural.

God's Holy Spirit is going to do something. Something that is impossible without God, but with God, verse 37, nothing is impossible.

And you see, unlike Zechariah, Mary was prepared to allow that God can actually be God and that God can act like a God and not just like a human being.

[37 : 34] And she believed God's word, verse 38, let it be to me according to your word. She submits to God's word and she receives it with joy.

She submits to the claim of God's good news upon her particular life. And she rejoices in it. That's what the Bible means by faith.

It just means joyful submission to become a servant of God's word in your own life. That's all. And that's what the encounter with Elizabeth that she then has underlines for us.

Again, full of joy because it's full of faith. Mary's faith is reinforced by Elizabeth's reaction to her visit and that in turn we're told is precipitated by John who, verse 44, we're told he leaps for joy as soon as Mary arrives.

He leaps for joy, this tiny embryo arriving to the house in Mary's body and John, the six-month-old baby in the womb, leaps for joy.

[38 : 43] Does that sound extraordinary to you? Well, of course it's extraordinary. That's the whole point. This is the breaking in of something absolutely extraordinary. It's something supernatural.

It is the glory of heaven above breaking in to this whole world of ours, a world of despair, a world of pain, a world of darkness and bringing joy so that even unborn babes in the womb leap and dance.

But that is what happens, isn't it? when even ordinary humble people receive the good news of Jesus Christ with faith and with joy.

And that's the verdict here in verse 45. Mary is blessed and filled with joy. Why? Because she believed. She believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord, says Elizabeth.

No doubt very painfully aware of the total contrast between Mary and her joyful praise and her own husband in his pitiful silence. He had not believed and the result was silence.

[39 : 51] Mary did believe the same message of God's great salvation and the result was a song of joy. We call it the Magnificat beginning at verse 46, magnifying the Lord.

Why is she rejoicing with exultant joy? Because in believing and accepting and making the good news of God her own, her heart and mind have been opened, her eyes have been opened to see, to understand the reality of who God really is.

He's my Savior, she sings in verse 47. He's the mighty one who has done marvelous things for me. She understands who God really is and what he's like.

He's not just a powerful creator. He's not just a distant ruler. He's a Savior who draws near. He's the God, she says, who topples the proud and the arrogant and who lifts up and helps the humble, the hungry, the needy, ordinary people just like her.

And she understands what God is about. She understands verse 55, you see, what the whole Bible is about. It's been the story of God's mercy to people like her promised right back from the beginning in Abraham's time and now fulfilled, she says, for the whole world in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[41 : 19] And so she has grasped that this gospel is personal news of great joy for her and for everyone like her. That's what happened then and that's what still happens today.

It's happening all over the world today, isn't it? Where people hear the good news of Jesus Christ from his messengers just like the angels, same word, messenger, sent from God as servants of the word.

When people receive that message from them with joy and with trust, not with blind faith, not with unthinking faith, but just where there's enough humility to believe the evidence that is abundant, that is irrepressible.

When you are humble enough to believe that God can be God and act like God and that just because I can't do something doesn't mean it's impossible for God to do something or just because I can't understand something it doesn't mean it's incomprehensible.

We're so arrogant as human beings. If I can't do it and I can't understand it, no one can do it. But where there's a little humility to believe that things that are impossible with us are not impossible if there is a real God who made all things, it's a road to joy.

[42 : 40] And today, when people are humble enough to investigate these things and find out about them, there is no less exultant joy than we see here in Elizabeth and Mary even in John.

But how can you join in the joy of this good news of salvation especially if previously you have resisted it and you've rejected it?

Well, the answer is as Mary found out that he is a God of infinite mercy and that's what she sings about. And in his mercy he does grant repentance and he leads people to that joy in Jesus Christ even when they have resisted and scorned that good news shamefully in the past.

And that's surely what the final section of chapter 1 is all about, isn't it? Verse 57 to 80 where we see the good news of the Savior met at last with repentance.

Luke shows us Zechariah again. Now he's a happy parent but he meets the gospel now with repentance and the result is he speaks. His tongue is released again in praise and proclamation of the Savior.

[43 : 58] Once again, notice carefully Luke's concerns in this passage. He doesn't need to give us any of this detail, does he? But it's both authentic historical detail but also he is making a very clear point.

Do you see how much he emphasizes the friends and neighbors of Zechariah and Elizabeth? Verse 58. They're the ones driving the events. They're the ones who are joyful in this birth but they were no clue whatsoever as to its significance.

And verse 59, they are determined that their traditions and their culture will be continued so that this child is named according to custom after Zechariah the father.

They want to safeguard the posterity of the family name. In fact, that was very, very important to these people. In fact, to many of them it was the only thing that mattered. That was the whole significance of this pregnancy so that Zechariah's name would be carried on.

But against all that pressure to conform, Elizabeth says, no, he'll be called John. So they turn to Zechariah expecting him to take his wife in hand.

[45 : 09] Ignore this crazy woman. Must be her hormones. We'll get some sense out of the father. Zechariah, what's he going to be called? How easy it would be for Zechariah to succumb to the pressure of family, pressure of culture, the pressure of all the expectations of his friends and relatives, wouldn't it?

How easy for Zechariah to say, yes, yes, Mary's just a bit, Elizabeth's just a bit overexcited. Don't be silly. We'll call him Zach after all. How easy for Zechariah to have taken these earthly blessings from God's hand and then just ignored all the spiritual responsibilities that these blessings were merely a part of and without which they would have been absolutely meaningless.

How easy. Isn't that what happens so often in all of our lives? How quickly we forget spiritual responsibilities in the face of God's many blessings of family, yes, jobs, possessions, careers, friendships in abundance, so many things that we pray for, so many treasures that fill our lives like the life of the rich man that we'll meet in Luke chapter 12.

But when our soul is required of us as his soul was suddenly required of him, will we also be found to have been fools because despite all of this treasure we've taken at God's hands we were not, as Jesus says, rich towards God.

How easy for Zechariah. But look at verse 63. Praise God for his mercy. Zechariah didn't abandon Elizabeth's testimony and he didn't abandon his responsibility to God in face of intense pressure to conform to this world's ways, to this world's customs, to the ways of his family and his friends.

[47 : 05] He said, no, his name is John is what he wrote. He might have just written, God's word must be obeyed.

Remember Jesus says later on in Luke chapter 6, don't call me Lord and not do what I tell you. And so at last, in Zechariah's public testimony of obedience to God's word, his judgment is reversed and his mouth is opened.

And verse 64, he spoke, blessing God. Do you remember back in verse 17 how the angel had said of John that his ministry would be one of turning the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous?

Well, here is his first convert. Quite literally, his own father's disobedience turned to the wisdom of salvation. He repents and the fruit of his repentance is this glorious song of praise and proclamation.

And we're told verse 65, the whole area, all the hill country of Judea wandered in astonishment and with reverent fear they talked to each other saying, what then will this child be?

[48 : 25] In other words, what is God doing here? All the fruit of God's wonderful gospel at last being received with repentance leading to joyful faith and resulting in speech, gospel speech from this erstwhile silent man.

And his song, as I've said, is one of the richest in the Bible. It's filled with joy. He is filled with the Spirit and as always in Luke's gospel and Acts, the filling of the Spirit comes for witness.

And he speaks, verse 69, of a great Savior and verse 77 of a wonderful salvation. Nothing less than the forgiveness of sins through God's tender mercy.

Nothing less than light in the darkness of lives lived under the shadow of death. nothing less than guiding feet into everlasting peace, the way of wholeness and health and joy everlasting beyond the curse.

You see, when God's mercy leads even an erstwhile cynic to repentance and faith, the fruit can be the sunrise of a Savior's light whose reach is far and wide and touches the lives of countless others.

[49 : 46] I've known that to happen often. Often, perhaps when a young man or woman comes from home to university and finds somebody, often in their first days and weeks of being a student, somebody who comes as a messenger to share the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ with them and they come to realize that the gospel is true and they meet it no longer with resistance but with repentance that leads to rejoicing.

And sometimes in the face of great pressure from friends and from family and from their neighbors and indeed from the whole culture, our western culture here in this land or it might be China or Thailand or India or somewhere far away.

But despite all that pressure, they determined to say with Zechariah, no, whatever you want of me, Lord God of heaven, I will do.

and whatever you, my friends and family and culture demand of me, I will not do. I will rejoice in this great salvation. Friends, the Holy Spirit who spoke those wonderful words way back then is speaking the same wonderful words to us today.

and his message about the Lord Jesus Christ can bring you also personal knowledge of salvation and the forgiveness of your sins just as it did for Zechariah.

[51 : 14] Don't meet that word with resistance. If you have in the past, now is the time to turn and meet it with repentance and rejoicing.

And if you do, you also will join the joy. You will join the song of the Savior's sunrise. You'll experience the dawn of a new day.

That's what the Christian message is all about. It's about the sunrise of a new day. It's about the beginning of the way of peace through the tender mercy of our God for all who will receive it with joy.

Luke says to us this morning, look at Mary, look at Elizabeth, look at John, and look at old Zechariah eventually at the last, and do as they did.

Receive the good news with joy, and join in. Join in with the songs for a Savior's sunrise. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, I we thank you that despite the darkness of our hearts, despite the recalcitrance of our wills, you are a God of mercy.

[52 : 27] You sent your Son. You've sent to us by your Holy Spirit the gospel of your Son, that our hearts might be turned from the disobedience of death to the wisdom of your way of great salvation.

So, Lord, may each of us this morning meet the good news with gladness and joy, and leave this place with a song in our heart, a song of praise to you, our God.

In Jesus' name, Amen.