



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 3

Christmas Accounts in the Gospels: An Adult Advent Study

Christmas at Luke's House

Introduction

There are many reasons why having a live Nativity display on the front lawn of the church is a bad idea. Cleanup is one of the obvious reasons. General liability is another. But the principle reason has to do with what happened to a church some years back. A big, well-to-do congregation in a North Dallas neighborhood decided to have a live Nativity display for several nights close to Christmas: great publicity, a gift to the neighborhood, a gentle reminder that “Jesus is the reason for the season!” So they built a shed, recruited Mary and Joseph, shepherd and kings, and animals. Now anybody can bring in some sheep and a donkey, maybe even a goat. But because this happened in Texas, the lowing cattle were replaced with a Texas Longhorn steer. Now I don’t know that a Longhorn steer is any more skittish or stubborn than any other kind of cow, but this one had a mind of its own. Somehow it managed to escape its tether not once but twice, and *Texas Monthly* magazine reported that it was the senior pastor who ran through the neighborhood chasing it down.

The reason we have Nativity displays—live or otherwise—is because of St. Francis of Assisi. About eight hundred years ago, Francis was concerned that the feast of Christmas had become largely about gifts and parties. He wanted Christians to remember that this

was about the birth of Jesus, and so he created the now-famous tableau, like the one on display in the front of many sanctuaries today. The first ones were live and outdoors, of course, but over the centuries, artists fashioned the characters out of wood and clay. Some were very simple; others were elaborate, the characters dressed in fine clothing and jewels. Soon these displays figured prominently in churches all across Europe. For people who could not read the story, it was a way to make it come alive as a focus for devotion and prayer. And people have been making and collecting crèches ever since.

Luke’s Fully Decorated House

This morning, we visit the third Gospel house on our journey through Advent. First, we went to Mark’s spare and plain cottage. Last week, we visited Matthew’s huge Victorian crammed with relatives and strangers. Today, we visit Luke. As you can see, Kevin Burns has portrayed this house as an open and welcoming ranch house. Kids are playing in the yard, which they share with a variety of animals. There is a full porch that invites visitors to stop by for a visit. At Christmas time, Luke’s place is decorated within an inch of its life. There are lights everywhere, and Christmas trees in several rooms. Among the displays on the front lawn is

a live Nativity (complete with llama!). Christmas carols are playing from loudspeakers mounted on the roof.

Luke is the Gospel that gives us the Christmas we know best and love the most, with mother and child in the first wonderful moments of cherishing the miracle of birth. It describes a place of warmth and safety, despite there being no room in the inn. Angels fill the night sky with wondrous music. Shepherds abide in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night—just like young David did before he was anointed by Samuel, later to become king. And young Mary ponders everything in her heart. Christmas at Luke’s house is just what we all want most: beauty and joy and peace.

Luke’s Gospel before the Gospel

But in fact, there is a good deal more going on at Luke’s house than meets the eye. With each of our Gospel visits, we have been asking: Where does the good news begin? With Mark, it begins with John the Baptist, the herald or messenger who prepares the way for the Messiah. Matthew begins with Abraham, to whom God promised not only children in his old age but a channel of blessing for the whole human family. Like Matthew, Luke has a “backstory” to Jesus’ ministry. But Luke doesn’t just tell us about the birth of Jesus. He spends an entire chapter (eighty verses!) on what came before that. It is, as one commentator writes, the “gospel before the gospel.”¹

Before looking closely at this intriguing prequel to Christmas, we need to notice that the first three chapters of Luke are like videos, each of which has a time/date stamp on it. Chapter 1 (after the brief introduction, v. 5) begins: “In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah.” Then chapter 2 starts: “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.” Finally, chapter 3 (where Luke introduces John the Baptist) begins: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod [son of King Herod] was ruler of Galilee . . .”

On the one hand, these are what they appear to be: time/date stamps. Events in the ancient world were often dated in relationship to reigning monarchs. If you don’t have an absolute calendar, this is simply how you tell time. But recently, biblical scholars have been

suggesting that Luke is doing more than orienting his readers in time. He is also locating them theologically and politically. N. T. Wright describes the opening of chapter 2 like this:

Augustus was the adopted son of Julius Caesar. He became sole ruler of the Roman world after a bloody civil war in which he overpowered all rival claimants. . . . [He] turned the great Roman republic into an empire, with himself at the head; he proclaimed that he had brought justice and peace to the whole world; and, declaring his dead adoptive father to be divine, styled himself as “son of god.” . . . Augustus, people said, was the “savior” of the world. He was its king, its “lord.” Increasingly, in the eastern part of his empire, people worshiped him, too, as a god.²

Luke is writing long after Augustus was dead, but the empire continued, and worshiping the emperor was part of the fabric of all those towns and cities where the new Christian communities were being formed. It’s just what you did at the beginning of the Rotary Club meetings in Corinth and Philippi and Athens. It was even stamped on the money: “Caesar Augustus—son of god.” *That’s* the setting in which the angels sing. The heavenly music that floats over a weary world is not just a pious sentiment. It is a statement about who is *really* God. “Fear not,” said the angel. “For behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David [a backwater, nothing village to the Romans, but ground zero of Israel’s greatest king] a Savior, who is Christ [the Messiah], the Lord.” All those imperial titles, Luke tells us, *really* belong to the newborn child.

At Luke’s house, we walk through all the beautiful and familiar scenes of Christmas—the crèche, the carols, the warm and peaceful glow. And then we are invited deeper into the house and deeper into the story. Here the good news doesn’t begin with Jesus. It doesn’t begin with John the Baptist. It begins with John the Baptist’s parents. Zechariah and Elizabeth are old. No matter how good and fulfilling their lives and their marriage had been, without children (in the worldview of the time) they had no future: no one to care for them in old age, no one to mourn their deaths, no one to carry on their legacy and names. Then one day, as Zechariah was serving as priest in the Temple in Jerusalem,

an angel appeared and told him that he and Elizabeth (at long last) would become parents. And it was Abraham and Sarah all over again: when life seemed almost over, God gave the gift of new life. To those who had no hope, God gave the gift of the future.

Luke's crafting of this gospel before the gospel is intricate and powerful. There are two appearances by the angel Gabriel: first to Zechariah and then to Mary. They are perfect contrasts: an old man and a young girl, a priest of the great Temple in Jerusalem and a peasant from a small town far from the city. He protests and asks the angel for a sign; she receives the angel's news with courageous grace. Zechariah is made speechless by the angel: nine months of silence so that he can really learn what is going on. Mary immediately sets out on a journey to be with her cousin Elizabeth and sings the most amazing song.

Luke's Themes

It is the songs of these two—Mary and Zechariah—that embody the good news. They are the overture to Luke's Gospel. Mary's song (Luke 1:46–55) is about what God is going to do in the world and to the world. Mary sings about the future in the past tense, because to the eyes of faith, God's victory has already happened, and it is radical stuff. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. The world is upside down: power no longer belongs to the rich; food (which means life) is available to the hungry poor; those who already have enough aren't getting more.

Zechariah's song (Luke 1:67–79) carries the same themes: God will redeem God's people, save them from their enemies, and give them freedom to worship God without fear. Zechariah sings about his son John's ministry. John is the one who will prepare the way for the Messiah, whom Zechariah calls "Dayspring," the one who will bring light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death and who will guide people into the way of peace.

Just as the overture to a ballet, opera, or musical announces the melodies that will be heard later, the songs of Mary and Zechariah set the tone for the entire Gospel of Luke. Jesus' ministry begins with a sermon in Nazareth where he announces his mission to preach

good news to the poor and liberty to the oppressed. When his former neighbors ask him to perform a miracle, he reminds them that there were many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha. He was not sent to cure any of them but rather the general of the Syrian army. Jesus has more to say about money, poverty, and the care of the poor in this Gospel than in any other. Jesus proclaims the reign of God, and Luke makes it clear that God's reign is present in the words and actions of Jesus. Finally, tax collectors and other sinners are welcome in Jesus' company; women and Gentiles are featured prominently. Jesus is both a light to enlighten the Gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel (Luke 2:29–32).

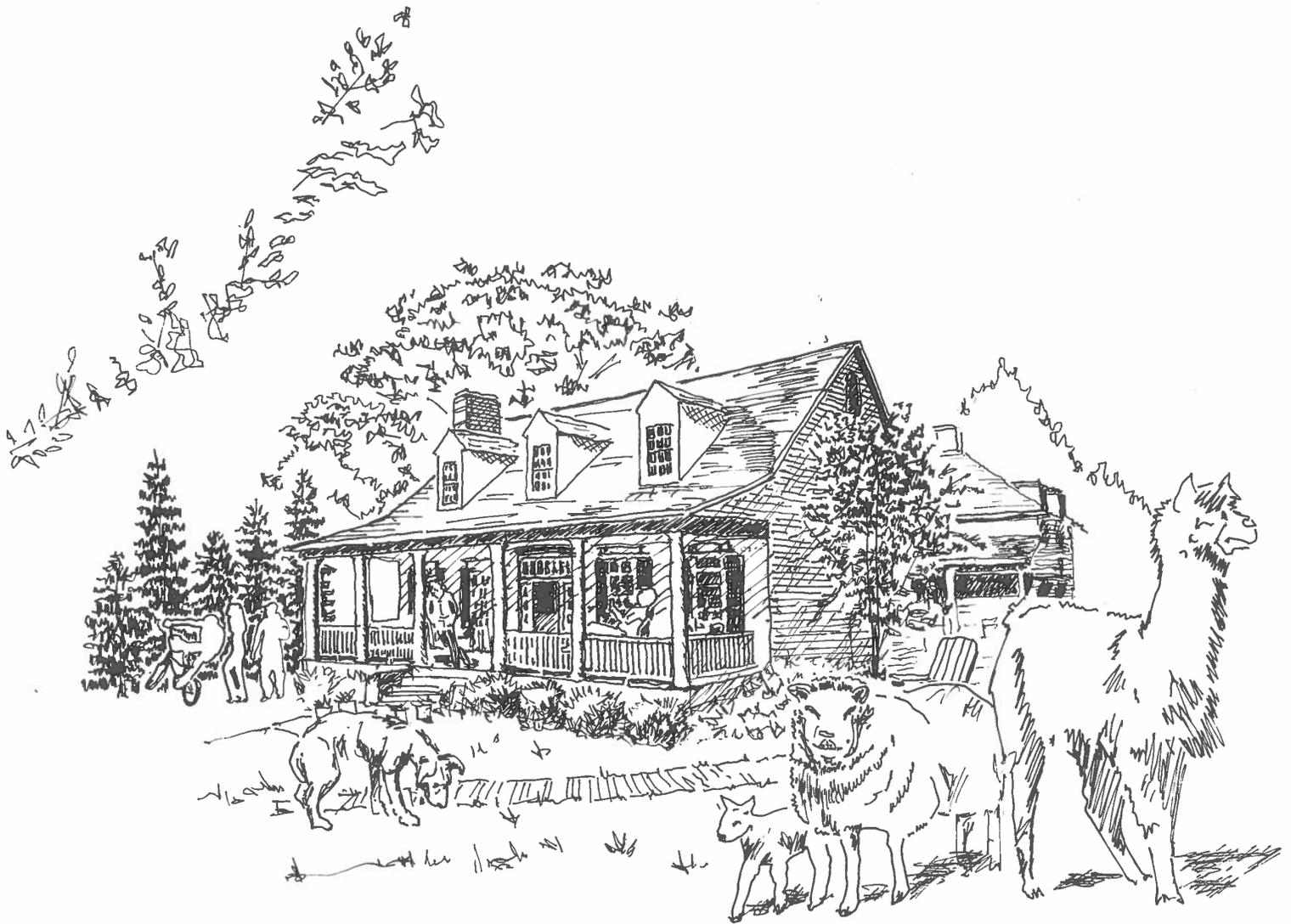
For Mary, Zechariah, and Luke the Gospel writer, all of this is the sign that God has not forgotten God's people or the promises made long before. God remembers those promises, in particular the ones made to Abraham and Sarah: there will be a future, a future of blessing for the whole human family. Is that what was going on in the world where John and Jesus were born? No. Is that what Mary and Zechariah *saw* with their eyes? Was there evidence for any of this? No again. But at Luke's house, we see with the eyes of faith, and (God willing) we shape our lives accordingly. Once again, we have heard good news: that despite all the signs to the contrary, God has not forgotten us; God has not forgotten God's world; God has not abandoned God's most broken and needy people. The birth of Jesus is, as the angels sang, good news of great joy for all people.

Notes

1. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 14.
2. *Ibid.*

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Luke is the Gospel from which we probably borrow the most imagery as we think of Christmas and decorate our own homes for the season. I wanted a house that conjured those positive emotions: the smell of delicious food being prepared, the sound of children playing, a place for family to gather. I have happy memories of visiting my grandparents' farm in rural Kentucky as a child. My favorite place there was the large covered porch. One could sit there for hours and watch the infrequent vehicles drive the gravel road in front of the house. Everybody waved. There were no strangers. And if you sat on the porch for long enough, you could meet and talk with every family member who lived within ten miles of the farm as they passed through to welcome the visitors.