



l uke's introduction to his gospel
luke 1.⁵-2.⁵²
part 2

t he annunciation of jesus
luke 1.²⁶⁻³⁸

i n t r o d u c t i o n

In our previous homily, the first in a series of eight homilies examining Luke's introduction to his Gospel that is found in Luke 1-2, we examined Luke 1.⁵⁻²⁵, which we titled "The Annunciation Concerning John the Baptist." There, Luke introduces Zacharias, Elisabeth, and John. Luke, we suggested, uses them, their names, and their life experiences to inform the reader concerning the nature of his message. God, having made promises in the past, is calling those promises to mind, and preparing to fulfil them in unprecedented ways. He has promised and will now act in our, at times, barren lives in most unexpected and merciful ways. He is about to reveal a dispensation of mercy unlike any other. We might think of the prophet Jeremiah, and one of his most hopeful visions of a blessed future.

“Behold, the days come, saith the LORD,
that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel,
and with the house of Judah:
Not according to the covenant
that I made with their fathers
in the day that I took them by the hand
to bring them out of the land of Egypt;

which my covenant they brake,
although I was an husband unto them,
saith the LORD:
But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel;
After those days, saith the LORD,
I will put my law in their inward parts,
and write it in their hearts;
and will be their God,
and they shall be my people.
And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour,
and every man his brother, saying,
'Know the LORD:.'
for they shall all know me,
from the least of them unto the greatest of them,
saith the LORD;
for I will forgive their iniquity,
and I will remember their sin no more.¹

God's dispensation of mercy and goodwill toward men will reveal, and bring into the lives of those who hear and accept the good news, an un-reproaching God. Here, we think of the revelation that inspired a boy of fourteen, who, fully aware of his "lack"—or, put in Luke's terms, fully aware of his bareness—nevertheless boldly approached his God.

"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, *and upbraideth not*; and it shall be given him."²

¹ Jeremiah 31.³¹⁻³⁴

² 2 James 1.⁵. Emphasis added. We often think of the "lack of wisdom," as the "absence of knowledge." But the word, "wisdom," Greek *sophia*, is much more than knowledge, information, data. The possession of *sophia* is also about the ability to act rightly. "The reference is to prudent, considered, experienced and competent action to subjugate the world and to master the various problems of life and life itself" (*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. VII, p. 476).

Joseph surely learned the general truth that God answers prayers. He learned that God would answer his specific prayers. But perhaps the most potent lesson learned was that God answers, specifically, the prayers of those of lack in so many ways. In doing so, God does not upbraid. He is not a scolder. So, he can be approached boldly by one who is not really "prepared" to approach him.

In revealing Himself as a merciful or accepting God, and thus removing the doubt that is brought on by the fear of reproach, God empowers those who take this revelation into their souls. They will be empowered to act in a manner consistent with the character of God (“turn the disobedient to the wisdom [abilities] of the just”), most notably in how they relate to others. The revelation of His acceptance inspire and empower them to resist the human instinct to show reproach one for another (“turn the hearts of the fathers to the children”). It produces greater mercy and more acceptance one for another among mankind.

Having established this foundation in the first narrative of his introduction, Luke presses on to his second introductory narrative. In it, he introduces us to another miraculous conception and another promised and promising child. This child will bring even greater promise into the lives of those who hear of and accept him than the first—infinately greater.

high, higher, highest

It has been just 6 months since Gabriel visited Zacharias. Now he comes to the city of Nazareth to visit a virgin by the name of Miriam. Her name means something like “to be high,” “elevated,” “exalted.” The angel confirms the truth of her name, greeting her as one “*highly* favoured.” The additional, “the Lord is with thee,” to say nothing of what follows, evidences that it is God Himself that holds her in such high esteem.

Humbly wondering what this might mean, she is informed that she will conceive a son. This son will “be called the Son of the *Highest*.” The angel will inform Miriam momentarily that the coming child will be “called the Son of God.” So, we can certainly understand this “Son of the Highest” to mean “Son of God.” His origins and birth are of God. However, we might also consider this “Son of the Highest,” to reflect the character of the Son. Of all sons, he is the highest. Even this superlative seems an understatement and does not do justice to his greatness. A latter-day apostle once testified,

“I testify that He is utterly incomparable in what He *is*, what He *knows*, what He has *accomplished*, and what He has *experienced*.... We can trust, worship, and even adore

Him without any reservation! As the only Perfect Person to sojourn on this planet, there is none like Him!”

“In intelligence and performance, He far surpasses the individual and the composite capacities and achievements of all who have lived, live now, and will yet live!”³

This insight into the magnitude of the Son’s spiritual supremacy is simply breathtaking. We do more than join the astonished disciples in their question, “What manner of *man* is this?”⁴ We ask, “What manner of *Divine Being* was he—is he? We mean no disrespect to any of us when we say, “We may have been created in his image, but oh how very different he is from us!” We show no disrespect to the Prophet Joseph Smith when we say that though he may have “done more save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it,”⁵ he is a very distant second indeed

Many are the individuals and varied the means that have taught of the Son’s superiority. Consider Israel’s very first commandments.

“Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image,
or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above,
or that is in the earth beneath,
or that is in the water under the earth...”⁶

This admonition is surely an attempt to keep us from worshiping the false gods that are on every street corner. But it is also an attempt to remind us that no representation can portray him who is the “Greatest of All.” There is no one and no thing like him. Many who come afterward will latch on to this truth and speak it over, and over, and over again.

³ Neal A. Maxwell, *Conference Report*, October 1981, p. 9

⁴ Matthew 8.²⁷

⁵ DC 135.³

⁶ Exodus 20.³⁻⁴

“To whom then will ye liken God?
Or what likeness will ye compare unto him?
“To whom then will ye liken me,
Or shall I be equal?”⁷

As Elder Maxwell’s quote suggests, it is not simply individuals—from the least to the greatest in spiritual capacity—who pale in comparison to his eminence.

“Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket,
And are counted as the small dust of the balance.

All nations before him are as nothing;
And they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity.”⁸

Even this is saying too little, however. Perhaps no passage speaks to the Son’s highness better than Psalm 113.⁴⁻⁶

“The LORD is high above all nations,
and his glory above the heavens.
Who is like unto the LORD our God,
who dwelleth on high,
Who humbleth himself
to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth!

That is one impressive and awe-inspiring universe out there! But God, the Son, is unimpressed. The impressiveness, inspiration, grander, power, size, and potential of the universe pales in comparison to that of the Only Begotten Son of God. It is all below him. It is a humble concession, and an act of unimaginable love for him to look upon and involve himself in it. It is, as an angel declared to Nephi, a “condescension.”⁹

⁷ Isaiah 40.^{18, 25}. See also Isaiah 46.^{5, 9}; Jeremiah 10.^{6, 9}; 51.¹⁹; Micah 7.¹⁸; Psalm 35.¹⁰; 71.¹⁹; 89.⁶⁸

⁸ Isaiah 40.^{15, 17}

⁹ 1 Nephi 11.¹⁶

The Son undoubtedly has several reasons for revealing his preeminence, but none of them have anything to do with megalomania. We know that he *does* involve himself in this universe, so far below him. We know, further, that he involves himself in the life of each of us, no matter how lowly. Perhaps he wants us to know of his greatness so that we can understand our worth. After all, if such a magnificent Being cares, loves, and works with us so willingly, we must have real and incredible value. Perhaps too, he wants us to understand his greatness so that we understand the power to which we have access through him.

If we had not already understood that Luke has an extraordinary story to tell, his repeated use of the superlative “highest,” a kind of pun on Miriam’s name, has clued us in. His story is of the highest importance. It speaks of the highest of Beings doing the highest of things, bringing about the highest potentialities.

the 2nd oracle

After Gabriel’s salutation, the angel utters his second oracle in six months.

“Fear not, Mary:
for thou hast found favour with God.
And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb,
and bring forth a son,
and shalt call his name JESUS.
He shall be great,
and shall be called the Son of the Highest:
and the Lord God shall give unto him
the throne of his father David:
And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever;
and of his kingdom there shall be no end.”

We have already seen that the child Mary will bear, the most magnificent of sons, is to be the Son of God. But Gabriel’s second oracle teaches us more about this Son. First, we learn that

his name is to be *Yehôshu'a*, Jesus. His name, of course, has a symbolic meaning that will indicate something about his nature, and about his role in human history: “Yahweh saves,” “Yahweh delivers,” “Yahweh rescues,” “Yahweh brings victory.”

It seems inevitable that upon learning the Son’s name, we would immediately think of the Old Testament Joshua. Whatever we may think of the alleged means by which he did it, it is clear that Joshua is credited with having led Israel to victory against its enemies such that Israel was able to enter and obtain a land of inheritance.

The child’s name, then, suggests that he will lead others to victory against powers that would otherwise defeat them, and deny them an inheritance. To describe all the enemies we encounter, all the ways that he assists us in our battles with such forces, and the glory of the inheritance is simply beyond the scope of this homily, this series of homilies, or all the homilies we could hope to write. Scripture is one long meditation on the saving and victorious labors of God in behalf of those he loves so much. With the Gospel writer, John, we humbly acknowledge our limitations in speaking of him and his labors in our behalf:

“And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written.”¹⁰

Nevertheless, we feel a desire to say a little something about such momentous labors. First, let us speak of the enemies we face, against whom he defends us, and against whom he brings us victory. We begin by taking the long view. We will let the great Book of Mormon prophet, Jacob, do the talking.

“O the greatness of the mercy of our God, the Holy One of Israel! For he delivereth his saints from that awful monster the devil, and death, and hell, and that lake of fire and brimstone, which is endless torment.”¹¹

¹⁰ John 21.²⁵

¹¹ 2 Nephi 9.¹⁹

No book ever written does any better at describing the “carnal, sensual, and devilish;”¹² the “awful, sinful, and polluted”¹³ state into which men fall without the Atonement of Jesus, Son of God. Indeed, all are so “hardened,” and “fallen,” and “lost,” that, had he not come down to be “at-one” with us, and thus reveal a Father who is “at-one” with us, “all mankind must unavoidably perish.”¹⁴

“Our spirits must become subject to that angel who fell from before the presence of the Eternal God, and became the devil, to rise no more. And our spirits must have become like unto him, and we become devils, angels to a devil, to be shut out from the presence of our God, and to remain with the father of lies, in misery, like unto himself.”¹⁵

Little wonder, then, that these are some of the last words we hear from Nephi:

“I glory in my Jesus, for he hath redeemed my soul from hell.”¹⁶

If we take a shorter view of our enemies, and of Jesus’ victorious labors in our behalf, we remember Paul’s declaration that Jesus delivers us “from this present evil world,”¹⁷ for “we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”¹⁸

Of course, in our battle with “this present evil world,” we are not mere spectators, standing on the sideline, watching Jesus wage war against our enemies. We are active participants. But, in our battle, we are not alone. We have access to abundant help.

“The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer;
my God, my strength, in whom I will trust;
my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower.

¹² Mosiah 16.³

¹³ Alma 26.¹⁷

¹⁴ See Alma 34.⁹

¹⁵ See 2 Nephi 9.⁸⁻⁹

¹⁶ 2 Nephi 33.⁶

¹⁷ Galatians 1.⁴

¹⁸ Ephesians 6.¹²

“...he is a buckler
to all those that trust in him.

For who is God save the LORD?
or who is a rock save our God?
It is God that girdeth me with strength,
and maketh my way perfect.
He maketh my feet like hinds' feet,
and setteth me upon my high places.
He teacheth my hands to war,
so that a bow of steel is broken by mine arms.

Thou hast also given me the shield of thy salvation:
and thy right hand hath holden me up,
and thy gentleness hath made me great.
Thou hast enlarged my steps under me,
that my feet did not slip.

“For thou hast girded me with strength unto the battle:
thou hast subdued under me those that rose up against me.”¹⁹

What can we say more than this? It is all too marvelous. We struggle to find language sufficiently exalted to express our gratitude and awe. We could go on and on and still not say enough or say it well enough. Indeed,

“I stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me,
Confused at the grace that so fully he proffers me.”²⁰

Gabriel evokes all of this and more when he reveals the child's name as Joshua. But he evokes another name in his oracle: David. In evoking David's name, he witnesses, again, that

¹⁹ Psalm 18.^{2, 30-36, 39}

²⁰ See LDS Hymn #193, “I Stand All Amazed.” Emphasis added

the soon-to-be-born son will deliver Israel from its enemies.

“And I was with thee whithersoever thou wentest,
and have cut off all thine enemies out of thy sight,
and have made thee a great name,
like unto the name of the great men that are in the earth.
Moreover I will appoint a place for my people Israel,
and will plant them,
that they may dwell in a place of their own,
and move no more;
neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them any more,
as beforetime.”²¹

Unlike Joshua, who fought Israel’s battles and then retired, David would establish a kingdom. Not only would David never retire, but his kingdom would never end. The safety and security brought about by the Lord would be perpetual.

“And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee:
thy throne shall be established for ever.”²²

Gabriel and Luke knew what we know: that in spite of the promise of David and his kingdom, neither he nor it ever lived up to the promise. Judah’s Kings apostatized, looking for all the world, like unto the kings of all the other nations. National enemies resurfaced, humiliated, and defeated kings that sat on David’s throne.

But Jesus, as no other, would be true to his God. He would fulfill the Davidic promise. At this stage of Luke’s work, we are uncertain how this will come about, what Jesus’ kingship means, or what his kingdom entails. The Gospels will work to try and flesh all this out. Other New Testament authors will go further. Finally, they will assert that Jesus will put an end to all the kingdoms of this world and reign as King of kings and Lord of lords.

²¹ 2 Samuel 7.⁹⁻¹⁰

²² 2 Samuel 7.¹⁶

We may be uncertain what all of this means and how it will come to be. But, we know that neither Joshua nor David ultimately had power over those spiritual powers that threaten us. They were neither immune to such powers themselves, nor were they capable of empowering others against them. Their “kingdoms” were imperfect of thoroughly “of this world.”

But this Jesus, by divine invitation, took a far higher and more exalted throne than that of David’s temporal throne.

“The LORD said unto my Lord,
‘Sit thou at my right hand,
until I make thine enemies thy footstool.’”

Ultimately, Jesus would enter heaven and sit on a throne on the right hand of God. “Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.”²³

Now this is a true Deliverer, a true King, a true Son of God.

the holy spirit

The first oracle informed us that the approaching dispensation of grace would witness the Holy Spirit present and active in unprecedented ways. John, we were informed, would be “*filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb.*” This is, indeed, unprecedented—and we will see this fulfilled in the next introductory narrative.

But in visiting Mary, Gabriel delivers a second oracle. In this one, too, he speaks concerning the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit. This second statement concerning the Holy Spirit’s presence, it seems, is to be read in light of and in contrast to the first. The second is even more astonishing. It is even more unprecedented.

²³ Acts 5.³¹

“The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee,
and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee:
therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee
shall be called the Son of God.”

Whatever else this is intended to signify, it signifies that the Holy Spirit is to be present and active in the second child’s life in an even more astonishing and unprecedented way than it is in the first child’s life. The Holy Spirit may bear witness to John (and many others) that he is “*a child of God*,”²⁴ but its presence at Jesus’ conception will signify that he is “*THE Son of God*.” John himself will always remain acutely aware of Jesus’ preeminence, and strive to help his audiences capture its truth and meaning.

“John answered them, saying, ‘I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose.’”²⁵

In addition, while John is conceived in the ordinarily human way, Jesus’ conception is most extraordinary. The presence of Father *and* Holy Spirit at Jesus’ conception teaches us that Jesus is, as Son of God, also God the Son. In the language of the Book of Mormon, Jesus is “*God Himself*.”²⁶

Nothing impossible

Gabriel suggests to Mary that though the birth of her son is more miraculous and filled with greater potential than that of Elisabeth’s, nevertheless she can learn much from John’s birth. The great lesson that he mentions is this one: “*With God nothing shall be impossible.*”

But surely this testimony is not for Mary’s ears only. It is for ours. We are to receive Luke’s

²⁴ See Romans 8.¹⁶

²⁵ John 1.²⁶⁻²⁷

²⁶ Mosiah 13.³⁴

message with certainty. And more, we are to take his message into our own lives. We are to find ourselves in the story. To quote the Martin Luther,

“When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him. When you see how he works, however, and how he helps everyone to whom he comes or who is brought to him, then rest assured that faith is accomplishing this in you and that he is offering your soul exactly the same sort of help and favor through the gospel.”²⁷

“I can,” declares the Apostle Paul, “do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”²⁸ So it is for all.

The will of god

How very calm, submissive, and exemplary is Mary’s simple reply to all that the angel has told her: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” It reminds us of her son’s pre-mortal volunteerism—“Here am I, send me,”²⁹—and submission—“Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever.”³⁰ In visiting the Nephites after his resurrection, he would remind them that such had been his attitude throughout his earthly ministry and right up to that present moment: “I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning.”

Of course, we are to follow our Master’s example, including his willing submission to his Father.

²⁷ “What to look for and Expect in the Gospels,” *Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, Ed., Timothy F. Lull, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1989, p. 108

²⁸ Philippians 4.¹³

²⁹ Abraham 3.²⁷

³⁰ Moses 4.²

“After this manner therefore pray ye...
Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.”

Conclusion

We have learned a good deal about Luke’s work and intentions from the first thirty-eight verses of his introduction. In his work, Luke intends to demonstrate how God, having made promises, is now calling those promises to mind. Those promises include the ushering in of an unparalleled dispensation of mercy shown to those who are spiritually barren in so many ways. He will deliver them and bring them victory over their own barrenness and all forces that may seek to destroy their peace. He will change men’s hearts in regard to their own view of self, their view of God, and their view of their fellowmen. He will do all of this through an unparalleled bestowal of the Holy Spirit and through His Son, who will act as Savior and King. He will bring victory to all who hear and believe the glad tidings. Though we may not understand how God can do such marvelous things, and wonder if he can and will work so wondrously if our lives, we are reminded that “with God nothing shall be impossible.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!