

# ANNUNCIATION:

## ANNUNCIATION AS INTRODUCTION TO A PREQUEL CALLED CHRISTMAS

### PRELUDE

*If we understand Luke's familiar Christmas story as a lovely afterthought to that entire gospel, then the introductory chapter that relates the twin annunciations of the births of John and Jesus with Zechariah's and Mary's two "Magnificats" not only precede, but nearly pre-empt the angel choir's announcement in the Bethlehem night sky. Annunciation and nativity become a two-part prequel and reflective refrain to the gospel's wider message.*

[Note: this Commentary presumes fresh familiarity with Luke's complete introductory chapter, leading up to those lines so many cherish hearing each year, "And a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered ... "]

### A COMMENTARY ON LUKE 1

For anyone who has ventured even a single step beyond a literal appreciation of this gospel of unknown authorship we call Luke, a rich trove of stories, attributed sayings, and faith acclamations that sometimes mix and match a historical Jesus with a "Christ" of faith can be encountered. After that first step, there's no turning back. One understands Luke's story should not be taken as historical biography, but a construction, or re-construction of a story that had undergone revision and adaptation for decades before being written down in any semblance of the form we have today.

As such the introductory material of Luke's gospel that includes the two annunciation stories and the familiar Christmas story represent just such lovely and imaginative afterthoughts. To state the obvious, two of the four canonical gospels don't include any such story of any kind about how Jesus came into this world. For those early Jewish Christian faith communities, a nativity story was neither foundational nor fundamentally essential in order for them to tell their story.

The brevity of Mark's gospel begins with Jesus as a full grown adult at the Jordan with the Baptist; where he continues the same message by essentially *incarnating*, or *embodying* it, in word and deed. And by the time we get to John's gospel, constructed at the end of the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, the metaphorical meanings to be inferred from Jesus' nativity have been extrapolated into that heady co-eternal *logos*, the Word, that – in a single line – "became flesh and dwelt among us."

Matthew undertakes the lengthy and painstaking attempt to trace Jesus' Davidic lineage. As a result, "As it was foretold" and "as it was written," will be Matthew's echoing refrain throughout that gospel. But Matthew's separate annunciation story to Joseph, and a one-liner of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem that comprises all of one half of one sentence, suffices to set up his exclusive story of Herod's cunning treachery and the magi's epiphany.

Luke alone gives us the parallel annunciation stories of the births of John and Jesus to Zechariah and Mary, *sans* Joseph. Like widening a panoramic lens in order to take in a wider view, the entire nativity story can subsequently be viewed not only as a wonderful, but imaginary tale; but also as a fuller introduction to the entire gospel message, written as a lovely afterthought. In a word, the twin stories of the births of John and Jesus are a theological postscript that reiterates the themes and message portrayed in the chapters and verses that follow. Just take a look.

Essentially, the same message by the same means (a vision) comes first to Zechariah, then to Mary. Zechariah is considered a good guy, and good guys are supposed to have good things happen to them. So it is that he represents anyone to whom a great blessing – however delinquent -- should be bestowed. And there's no greater blessing in the ancient world than a son.

But it's far more than that. Look at the context. Zechariah is a priest (in an all-male priesthood in a patriarchal society) who takes his turn with

what was a conventional privilege and enters the “restricted area” of the inner sanctum of the temple. The temple, of course, represents the religious establishment, with all its power and authority to act as intermediaries between God and God’s people. And Zechariah is going about the daily perfunctory ritual of burning incense on behalf of the institution.

There’s little expectation that anything wonderful or out of the ordinary could possibly occur. Standing outside, the only thing his co-workers wonder is what could possibly be taking the old man so long? (Lk 1:21ff) It is only after he emerges and they realize someone or something must have slipped in where no unauthorized personnel were allowed. He has been struck speechless, and they readily surmise he has had an extraordinary, revelatory experience.

The underlying message is none too subtle. God’s messenger can even sneak into the holy temple to speak sometimes! Not only that, Zechariah will have nothing more to say that hasn’t already been regurgitated a gazillion times before; to the point God’s redemptive message has been reduced to rote memorization. So his capacity to speak is unnecessary until something *new* is to be said and heard once again.

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Between his going in, and his coming out, Zechariah’s typical human reaction that will be repeated time and again by plenty of others in the gospel story to follow: fear, then faith (trust, surrender or abandonment of ego), mixed with surprise, doubt, questioning, disbelief, astonishment, joy.

Now, about the second “annunciation” story for a moment.

Mary the young Jewish peasant woman, on the other hand, would have never been

allowed into the inner sanctum of the temple of course. But again, she is presumably going about her perfunctory, daily tasks with little expectation there is anything more to them than that. The dictated social order is intact. The imperial rule of Rome kept the peace through domination, force and violence; while the locals were allowed to practice their strange religion, as long as it didn’t substantially affect their lives or upset the status quo.

Then the same messenger with essentially the same message as the one to Zechariah interrupts the doldrums of her routine. Something extraordinary and utterly unexpected is about to happen. The impossible is about to become possible. It doesn’t matter if you’re old and barren, or an unmarried pubescent girl of the lowliest status possible. You can still get pregnant and participate in the co-creation of something new, something different, something *other* than what has been before. It will happen for Zechariah and Elizabeth, and then Mary and Joseph, with what is probably the most common way humans experience the imminent presence of the transcendent radically changing their lives. Just ask any parent.

Mary goes through the same reactions as Zechariah and Elizabeth: initial fear and trepidation that what is known and routine is about to change as a result of such an apparition; with the invitation to see something new that is about to take place. Here’s the reality of it all:

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Hence Elizabeth's great news must be kept under wraps (Lk 1:24). The shame of an old woman bearing a child is about as outrageous as an unmarried pregnant girl who claims she's still a virgin. So Mary literally takes to the hills and remains in seclusion for months with Elizabeth (Lk 1:39ff).

But it doesn't keep the news that's about to burst forth from kicking within Elizabeth's womb; let alone Mary's heart set aflame to sing her magnificent song (Lk 1:46-56).

Where what has become the normative convention has led to God's people becoming deaf, dumb and blind, Mary's subversive rap we call the "Magnificat" will foretell that new song for those who – as her son will later repeat over and over – have ears to hear. It becomes the marching song of those who will announce the great reversal of the way things are, in favour of the way things are meant to be, or going to be; how the haughty, high and mighty will be brought down, and the *anawim* (the poor and "lowly," the powerless, marginalized, and disenfranchised) lifted up.

Lest we be deluded thinking Mary's lovely song is too dear a message to speak to the harsher realities of our world today, consider British hymnist Andrew Pratt's very contemporary text, based on the familiar *Magnificat*.

*Upturned world, the bankers humbled,  
politicians brought to book,  
children show new ways of living,  
heads will spin and turn to look.  
Mary sang, exultant virgin,  
birth would change her life and ours,  
generations watch with wonder,  
shaken like wealth's shining towers.*

*Love incarnate's gentle thunder  
wakes the earth to truth and light,  
hypocrites meet naked justice,  
find no place in fear for flight.  
Mary sings, when will we hear her:  
revolution born of love,  
heralding new dispensation,  
cage the hawk and free the dove?*

*When the prison gates are broken,  
when the poor can feast and dine,  
then Magnificat is bringing  
age of justice and new wine.  
Wine of joy and celebration,  
end of hunger, God is near,  
time of endless new beginnings,  
birth of Jesus, end of fear.*

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Mary's song is one first sung by those eager to learn the tune and sing the refrain. But it is a message meant for *all* to hear, and heed, if not celebrate. Hence, Luke's gospel provides a second way for all to hear this, with what will be Zechariah's song.

When Elizabeth gives birth to her son, there's this squabble in the entire community over the child's name. Conventional wisdom would make it a *fait de complét*. The child should be named Zechariah, Jr.

But Zechariah (whose name means "God remembers") himself remembers what the divine messenger had instructed him that day in the temple. And the mute is given voice again to speak and announce his son's name would be John (meaning "man of God.").

Nothing more would then be heard of his son until John emerges from the wilderness to deliver his own lines that are as subversive as Mary's once were.

But it leaves enough room for us to do some imagining ourselves.

In those intervening years, I can just picture how Zechariah may have kissed his old wife good-bye one morning and went off to work in the temple for another day. Perhaps he passed by an orchard where the pomegranates were in bloom; and there was a nimbleness to his step he'd hadn't felt for a while.

Along the way, he'd begun to think of his greatest blessing, his son John; who – if he's like a lot of children -- may have also represented his father's greatest bewilderment, as well. Time and again he had pondered those things in his heart; about this son of his that ultimately wasn't his, and who'd left home and hearth for wilderness.

And then perhaps a new tune had begun to stir in the old man's head, and some words to which he was unaccustomed began to rise up from somewhere deep within him.

By the time he got to work he was somehow humming it aloud, and when he entered the temple the walls reverberated for the first time with his new song:

*And you, child,  
will be called a prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord  
to prepare his way,  
to give his people knowledge of salvation  
through the forgiveness of their sins.  
In the heartfelt mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will visit us,  
to shine on those sitting in darkness,  
in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet to the way of peace.*  
(Lk1:76-79)

In this compilation of gospel music Luke gives us, Zechariah's canticle would be added to the new repertoire; along with that heavenly chorus that would hover over a Bethlehem stable and Mary's own little miracle, all the while singing "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people whom he has favoured!"

The prequel better known as the Christmas story would constitute the last of these three annunciations; in a mini-series that encapsulates the larger gospel story that would subsequently unfold.

The fact it was probably written almost as an afterthought in Luke's tradition hardly matters, with regard to what is nonetheless believable about it. That imaginary story about shepherds and stable, manger and a virgin Madonna would become as real for us – in the best sense of how they tell us what's real -- as some of those imaginary parables Luke's Jesus gives us; like the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan.

## POSTLUDE

*I wonder as I wander out under the sky  
How Jesus the saviour did come for to die  
For poor ornery people like you and like I  
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.*

From John Jacob Miles' collection of  
Appalachian carols, *Songs of the Hill-Folk*, 1934

Of course, both John and Jesus would come to meet untimely deaths at the hands of their executioners, the threatened authorities and the fickle crowds. But like a stirring wind that comes from who knows where, that gospel song would somehow continue to rise again

and again in many forms for "poor ornery people, like you and like I."

The familiar *Cherry Tree Carol* relates the apocryphal tale of a pregnant Mary walking in an orchard with a husband who is very human. She has a craving for cherries, and in his jealousy and bitter resentment Joseph is loath to accommodate her. So the unborn child who will one day command the winds and seas to obey him, has no trouble granting his mother's simple whim.

*Then up spoke baby Jesus,  
from within Mary's womb,  
"Bend down the tallest tree,  
that my mother might have some."*

*Then bent down the tallest branch,  
till it touched Mary's hand.  
Cried she, "O look, thou Joseph,  
I have cherries by command!"*

The tale juxtaposes the very human story of Mary and Joseph with an unexpected encounter; where fruitfulness that normally lies out of reach not only accommodates the lowliness of Mary's condition, but nature itself bends to the will of innocence that is given voice within her. She's not left to merely pick the low-lying fruit. So extraordinary is this divine gesture that the co-command she claims, proclaims and desires bends down the "tallest branch."

What does the tune tell us, once again?  
Something new is afoot in the garden!

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