

GOD IS ALWAYS WORKING

LUKE 1:5-25

Even as we go about our everyday lives, God is working and planning our futures. When He shows up, we are often amazed and overwhelmed by his power and love.

I. CONTRASTING KINGDOMS (VS 5-7)

The kingdom of God is on the offensive against the kingdom of this world.

- A. THE KINGDOM OF THIS WORLD (5a)
- B. THE KINGDOM OF GOD (5b-7)

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The only proper response to God's working out his plan in our lives is to worship him.

- A. AMAZED (21-22)
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God is Always Working

Luke 1:5-25

Last week we were introduced to the author of the Gospel of Luke. We covered some basic introductory issues. This morning we will start the actual historical narrative of Luke. There have been many so-called scholars who have tried to discredit the veracity of the Gospels. They try to frame the Gospels as if they are simply a collection of fables and stories. However, we will see that Luke makes it perfectly clear that what he has recorded is factual, and is dated by using Roman and Jewish historical figures and events.

The nation of Israel had spent 70 years in Babylonian captivity and had returned to the land approximately 538 B.C. They were conquered by the Greeks and then by Rome. The story of Luke begins around 40 B.C. when Mark Antony commissioned Herod to be King of Judea. These characters are easily dated and so these events take place in the context of an Israel who is ruled by a king who is answerable to Rome.

I want to make this point clear. The writers of the Gospels and the New Testament view themselves as recorders of history. The history is sacred history to be sure, nevertheless they are writing history. For us to read it any other way would be a mistake. I suppose some people have trouble reading the Gospels as history because they don't believe in a transcendent God Who interacts personally and intimately with people. Further, they don't expect miracles or prophecy because they are hard core materialists who rule out the possibility of anything supernatural.

In this morning's text we are going to encounter all three of these things head on. We will see God interacting personally and intimately with an individual and with His chosen nation. We will see the miraculous appearance of an angel, and the prophetic announcement of a baby predestined to be a powerful witness to the greatness of God.

I suppose I can understand why there are so many skeptics when it comes to the life of Jesus because there are so many who have ruled out the existence of the supernatural world.

And further, we have seen a lot of scams based on people who claim to be able to predict the future. Sometimes it good to be a skeptic, but other times it may not be worth it. If you travel a lot, you know that you encounter all sorts of crazy things. A man was traveling through an airport and came across a machine that claimed to be an artificial intelligence prophet. The man dropped a dollar in the machine. A voice came out of the machine saying, "You are an American. You are 5' 10" tall and weigh 150 pounds. You are booked on flight 408 to Los Angeles, California."

The guy was astounded. He thought and thought and decided that there was an actual person inside the machine scamming everyone. So he slipped into a rest room and changed his clothes. He put on a different coat, and pulled his hat over his ears so it hid his face. Hobbled like a shrunken old man, the guy stepped onto the machine, dropped in a dollar, and waited for the announcement. It wasn't long in coming, "You are an American. You are 5' 10" tall and weigh 150 pounds. And while you were in the rest room changing your clothes, your plane left for Los Angeles.

I don't think that was a very good use of this guy's time. However, the Gospels were written with skeptics in mind. They give historical markers along the way and invite us to check out their work.

I'm not sure how much time we believers spend thinking about what God has predestined us for and how He works in our lives on a daily basis. However, this morning's text invites us to think about these things. The main idea of this morning's text is this. **EVEN AS WE GO ABOUT OUR EVERYDAY LIVES, GOD IS WORKING AND PLANNING OUR FUTURES. WHEN HE SHOWS UP, WE ARE OFTEN AMAZED AND OVERWHELMED BY HIS POWER AND LOVE.** In other words, God is always at work in our lives whether we see it or not. If that's the case, then we ought to be living our lives more intentionally looking for God's hand.

CONTRASTING KINGDOMS (VS 5-7)

In verses 5-7 Luke makes it clear that there are two different kingdoms operating in the same space and that these are contrasting kingdoms. We know from the rest of the Bible that **THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS ON THE OFFENSIVE AGAINST THE KINGDOM OF THIS WORLD.** Jesus put it like this to Peter:

¹⁸And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18 / NIV).

You see, I think we always misinterpret this verse. We always picture the church as hiding behind gates trying to keep the devil from overrunning us. However, it is the devil and all of hell hiding behind gates trying to keep the power of the Gospel out. But even the very gates of hell cannot withstand the power of the Gospel. The Kingdom of God will crush the kingdom of this world.

THE KINGDOM OF THIS WORLD (5a)

In the very first phrase of verse 5, Luke introduces us to the kingdom of this world. He starts out, "In the time of Herod king of Judea." As we said, Mark Antony commissioned Herod as king in Judea around 40 B.C. Josephus, the early church historian informs us that Herod doesn't take his seat as king until 37 B.C. He rules until about 4 B.C. Herod was an evil king and the Jews never really respected him. He actually had his sons executed because he thought they were plotting against him. It is also said he had nine or ten wives and even killed one of them. By the time Jesus comes on the scene, Herod had rebuilt the temple and it was a magnificent structure. We have to be careful not to mix up the different Herods we meet in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. This is Herod the great. The Judea he ruled over is much like the area included in modern day Israel. He is the one who is king when both John the Baptist and Jesus are born. He is the one who ordered the slaughter of all the infants in Bethlehem. Herod the great was a clever politician. He knew how to stay on Rome's good side and he spent a great deal of energy in order to pacify the Jews and keep them under control. At any rate, under the rule of Rome, the world was a relatively peaceful place. There was easy worldwide travel and the world was pretty safe.

I want to encourage all of us who name the Name of Christ to remember that we exist physically in the kingdom of this world. We should not be surprised to see corruption in all governments around the world including our own. In my opinion we should neither get too excited about one form of government or politician nor should we be too antagonistic towards forms of governments or politicians. The facts for us as Christians living in the United States are; no one is stopping us from living out our faith. Neither Mayor Dailey nor the state of Illinois, nor the federal government are stopping us from sharing the Gospel with friends and family. They are

not stopping us from feeding the poor, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, welcoming strangers among us, or visiting the sick or those in jail. In fact, we enjoy a great deal of freedom to live out our Christian lives. It is irrelevant what the government does. It really pains me to see Christians arguing politics because we belong to the Kingdom of God and we should never find ourselves arguing and dividing over the Caesars of this world.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD (5b-7)

On the other hand, in the rest of verse 5 through verse 7, we are introduced to a couple who is firmly rooted in the Kingdom of God. It seems as if they are not interested one bit who is king over Judea. They are a godly couple dedicated to serving and pleasing God. The couple is introduced to us as Zechariah and Elizabeth. I want us to keep in mind that for the Hebrews, a name was more than what you answered to when someone called you. In the Bible, a name was meant to describe your nature, your character, and your being. Zechariah means Jehovah remembers. Elizabeth means God is a promise or God is my fortune. Let's look at who they are. Luke tells us that they are both from priestly families. They are from the tribe of Levi and particularly from Aaron's lineage. The priests that served at the temple only came from Aaron's lineage.

Look how Luke describes them in verse 6, "They were both upright in the sight of God. They observed all the commandments and regulations of Biblical Judaism, and they were blameless. That is quite a spiritual resume. I would love for God to say that about me, but I know I am not even close to living this kind of holy lifestyle. I'm trying, but not even close. This couple had dedicated their entire lives to God. Could God say that about you? We would think that God would be richly blessing them. With the type of lifestyles they were living, they should be enjoying good health, and life should be going well with them. That's our theology, isn't it? We think that if we are good people, then God should bless us. We shouldn't get sick, loved ones shouldn't get sick or die, and we shouldn't experience suffering or setbacks of any kind. In other words, God should reward us for our good behavior, right?

Sorry to disappoint us but look at verse 7, "But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years." In the Hebrew culture, children were considered to be a blessing from God. The Psalmist says:

“³ Children are a gift from the LORD;

they are a reward from him.

⁴Children born to a young man

are like sharp arrows in a warrior's hands”

(Psalm 127:3-4 / NLT).

Why would God withhold blessings from such a righteous couple?

It seems to me that God would want them to have many children so they could raise up more godly priests to serve in the temple. And yet we see a couple who is dedicated to God, suffering. And to further add to their suffering, they are now quickly approaching old age. It seems from the rest of the story that Elizabeth is past menopause and Zechariah isn't doing so well in that department as well. Who would take care of them in their old age? Who would they pass their inheritance on to? Just because we pursue holiness and may even think we are doing good, this is no guarantee that we won't suffer. In fact, as we go through the Gospel of Luke, we will see several righteous and holy people who endure great suffering. So one theological point we have

to clearly understand is this. Don't think that being a Christian, coming to church, serving in the church, giving money to the church, and being good will guarantee a life without suffering. That is bad theology. The correct theological position is this. The more holy one becomes, the more likely it is that they will face suffering. If you think this is unfair, then all we have to do is think about our Lord. He was perfect in every way, without sin, and yet, He suffered horribly, like no one else in history. The most holy person in history suffered the most.

So we must keep this in mind as we study through the Gospel of Luke and in fact the entire Bible. The kingdom of this world is under the control of Satan and it is at war with the Kingdom of God. No matter how evil and bleak things look, we must keep this truth in mind. **THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS ON THE OFFENSIVE AGAINST THE KINGDOM OF THIS WORLD.** And we know which kingdom will win. The Kingdom of God will crush the kingdom of this world to dust. Why?

GOD'S HAND (VS 8-20)

Because we see God's hand at work in verses 8-20. But God's hand is not always visible and is often mysterious. **SOMETIMES WE CAN SEE GOD WORKING WHILE OTHER TIMES, GOD IS WORKING BEHIND THE SCENES. BUT WE CAN COUNT ON THE FACT THAT HE IS ALWAYS WORKING.** Did you ever stop to think about this? If we are truly children of God and love Him, God has promised us this through the pen of the Apostle Paul:

“²⁸And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them” (Romans 8:28 / NLT).

That's an incredible promise. That means that no matter how we perceive our circumstances, whether we think them good or bad, God is always working for our good. Does that give you a different perspective on your everyday life? I hope so. Let's look how God works in Zechariah and Elizabeth's life. Keep in mind, they have been faithfully following and serving God all their lives. They are now old and have not gotten the one thing they have desired most, a child to carry on their family name and receive their inheritance. Let's carefully observe God's hand working as Zechariah is chosen by lot in verses 8-10.

CHOSEN BY LOT (8-10)

We pick up the story at a time when Zechariah's division was on duty at the temple. There were 24 divisions of priests that served at the temple. Each division would be on duty for a week at a time. During most normal years, a division would serve two times during the year. There were approximately a total of 18,000 priests during this time. That would mean that there were approximately 750 priests in each division. There was a morning sacrifice and an evening sacrifice each day. A designated priest would enter the temple's holy place to burn incense. The rising smoke of the incense symbolized the prayers of Israel ascending up to God. The incense altar stood right in front of the curtain that separated this holy place from the Most Holy Place known as the Holy of Holies. It was a great honor for a priest to perform this task. They chose the priest by a means that is much like our modern day lottery. We know clearly from the Hebrew Scriptures that God often revealed His will to Israel with this method. During the week, only 14 priests out of the 750 would be chosen. At this particular time, Zechariah's number was drawn out of the hat. What an honor for Zechariah. This may happen to a priest only once in a

lifetime. Zechariah entered the holy place to offer up the incense on Israel's behalf. Meanwhile the worshipers prayed outside that God would accept the burnt offering, the meal offering, the drink offering, and their prayers. Since we have become so materialistic we tend to forget there are no coincidences with God. We may have felt lucky that our number was drawn out of the hat, but the Hebrews never thought like this. They would have all thought that God chose Zechariah to offer up this particular sacrifice at this particular time. I would encourage all of us to start thinking like the Hebrews. We should never think of coincidences, only God-incidents. We need to start to adopt biblical thinking and see that God is always working.

DELIVERED BY AN ANGEL (11-13)

Zechariah entered the temple and started to perform his duties. He stoked the fire, took some incense out of his bowl, poured it on the fire, and started to intercede for the nation of Israel in prayer. All of a sudden a message from God comes directly to Zechariah delivered in person by an Angel in verses 11-13. Let me just make a side note here. In Luke's Gospel and in his book of Acts, things happen during worship. God sent the Holy Spirit on Pentecost while they were worshipping. God shook the building in which believers were worshipping. He set Paul and Barnabas apart as missionaries during a worship service. God healed people during worship services. When we gather together here on Sundays, we ought to expect God to do things among us. We need to be awake and watching. God broke into Zechariah's worship by sending an angel. Needless to say, Zechariah was startled and gripped with fear. Over the years I have met people who play with the spiritual world, who talk about the spiritual world as if they were familiar with it. We need to be careful when dabbling in the spiritual world. In the Bible, whenever someone comes in contact with an angel, they are totally frightened, gripped with fear, and at times become ill or pass out. There was Zechariah, praying for Israel, and all of a sudden, an angel appears at the right side of the altar. If I was Zechariah, I would be thinking, "This can't be good. I'm a dead man." But the angel steadies him by saying, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been answered. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John."

Okay now, wouldn't you be a little confused if you were Zechariah? I know I would. He is in his official role of a priest interceding for the nation of Israel. He is praying for Israel. But now the angel tells him that his personal prayer has been answered. Here is a clue to what God is doing. The name John means grace in Hebrew. John is going to be a blessing to his parents. That's a given.

COMMISSIONED BY GOD (14-17)

But as we see in verses 14-17, John will be commissioned by God to be a blessing to the nation of Israel as well. Zechariah's personal blessing will turn out to be a national blessing as well. Before we get into this, I don't want us to miss this very important point. If we live holy and upright lives, our personal blessings will almost always spill on to those around us. People living righteous lives will be a blessing to their families, friends, church, and the world they come in contact with. I think it's important to see that God does predestine us to accomplish good works that He prepares in advance for us. John has a mission to accomplish. He will be a joy to his parents but he will bring lasting joy to many. He is going to be set apart by God to do great things. He will not drink any alcohol. John will be filled with the Holy Spirit from conception. Look at the contrast here. The Apostle Paul will pick up on it. John will never be under the influence of alcohol. Instead he will be controlled and driven by God the Holy Spirit. While on

duty, all priests were forbidden to drink alcohol. So what's implied here is that John will be ministering 24/7. His whole life will be dedicated to serving God. I'm hoping that all of us start to catch this vision that we are always on duty for God, looking to accomplish the works He is preparing for us.

Jesus will later pick up on this next point. John will come in the spirit and power of Elijah. The Jews believed that Elijah would return and become a forerunner to the coming of the promised Messiah.

In this role, John will lead many to belief in God, he will bring the peace of God to families and restore relationships. John will bring back to the fold, Jews who had lost their faith and perhaps wandered away. He would help others grow in their faith. He would prepare many to receive the ministry of the Jewish Messiah, Jesus. In the Gospel of Luke, joy and rejoicing come when something or someone who was lost is found. Jesus came to seek and save the lost.

VALIDATED BY GOD (18-20)

And these promises are validated by God in verses 18-20. Sometimes I think that we who read these stories are overly critical about the people involved. We say things like, "I would have said this," or "I would have done this." The fact is, if most of us came face to face with a real angel, we would just plain wet our pants. Zechariah asked a legitimate question, "Is God really going to trump science? I'm old and my wife has passed menopause? How does God plan on pulling this one off?" To be sure Gabriel seems a little irritated. Gabriel says in essence, "Look, I'm Gabriel, God's warrior angel. Here I am telling you this is a message from God and all you can do is make excuses why it can't happen? Don't you get it?" All throughout the Bible, when people come in contact with God or an angel, they almost always say something stupid. First of all, Zechariah is scared out of his mind. An angel shows up with this incredible message. How could he help not saying something stupid? At any rate, God chooses to validate His miraculous promise. He mutes Zechariah because he didn't believe. It's pretty hard for a priest to carry out his duties being unable to speak. Maybe Gabriel's message now is, "You have your assignment; a little less talk now, and a little more action. You take care of your part, God will take care of his."

Really, isn't that God's message to us? He has many wonderful things planned for us to accomplish. Jesus promised us that many people will come to Him if we witness. Our job is to tell people about Christ. God the Holy Spirit will take care of the rest. Our job is simply to walk in faith, to read the Bible, study the Bible, and to obey the commands of God. We need to pursue holiness and let God take care of how He chooses to use us. God has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. **SOMETIMES WE CAN SEE GOD WORKING WHILE OTHER TIMES GOD IS WORKING BEHIND THE SCENES. BUT WE CAN COUNT ON THE FACT THAT HE IS ALWAYS WORKING.**

WORSHIPING GOD (VS 21-25)

As we have already seen, God often chooses to work miracles while His people are gathered together. Verses 21-25 remind us that worshipping God is responding to God's work. **THE ONLY PROPER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORKING OUT HIS PLAN IN OUR LIVES IS TO WORSHIP HIM.**

AMAZED (21-22)

In verses 21-22, the worshipers are amazed to see what God had done. We may think, “What’s the big deal if Zechariah didn’t come out quickly? Perhaps he was just taking time to pray.” However, Israel had a healthy fear of God. During the day of Atonement, they would tie a rope and bells around the foot of the High Priest. When he entered the Holy of Holy to offer up the sacrifice on Israel’s behalf, if God was displeased with the High Priest or Israel, he would strike the High Priest dead on the spot. If the priests outside failed to hear the bells ringing, they would assume that priest had died because he was no longer moving around. They would then pull the dead body out of the temple by the rope attached to his ankle. Of course this would mean that God was not pleased and they were not forgiven of their sins as a nation. That is one thing we Protestants have forgotten about worship. We often come to the sanctuary here loud, joking, and talking about mundane life events. We have lost a sense of the holy. We would do well to enter the sanctuary quietly, thoughtfully, and prayerfully. If God just blinked, He could wipe us off the face of the earth. God expects us to be holy. The worshipers outside the temple were getting anxious. Did God reject their prayers? Was God going to quit blessing them? All of a sudden, Zechariah staggers out of the temple with a dazed look on his face, and unable to speak. They realized he had seen a vision. He was unable to bless them with the worship benediction because he couldn’t speak. The worshipers were amazed. They were in awe. Was this a good thing or a bad thing? At any rate, they must have seen Zechariah’s joy after a time and went away amazed that God was now speaking to Israel in visions again. Malachi is the last book in our Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures. Many scholars have called the time between the composition of Malachi to this point as the 400 silent years in which God did not give prophetic revelation to His people. If this is so, then it would be good news to Israel that God was once again speaking to His people in visions and through a priest in the context of national worship.

OVERWHELMED (23-25)

When God shows up, not only do we find ourselves amazed and awed, verses 23-25 demonstrate that we are often overwhelmed. After his week of service, Zechariah went home, unable to speak, but able to accomplish his assignment. Elizabeth got pregnant and went into seclusion. What other response could there be when God performs such a miracle. She must have pondered all the possible meanings of this miracle. Why would God choose to bless them with a child so late in life? Why did she have to suffer all those years with people looking down on her for not having a child? How beautiful was it for her to have a husband who didn’t divorce her to marry a woman who would give him children? What was God going to do with her child?

I have heard people almost flippantly say things like, “God told me this or showed me this.” If God actually spoke to any of us, we ought to be amazed, awed, and overwhelmed.” Luke wants us to know that God is constantly working in our lives and has many things He expects to accomplish. And **THE ONLY PROPER RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORKING OUT HIS PLAN IN OUR LIVES IS TO WORSHIP HIM.**

Being a Christian carries great blessings and great responsibilities. If we come to realize that as a result of being saved, we have been made children of the King Who has tasked us with accomplishing many good works He has predestined us for. Listen to how the Apostle Paul put it:

“⁸God saved you by his special favor when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. ⁹Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us

can boast about it. ¹⁰For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago" (Ephesians 2:8-10 / NLT).

EVEN AS WE GO ABOUT OUR EVERYDAY LIVES, GOD IS WORKING AND PLANNING OUR FUTURES. WHEN HE SHOWS UP, WE ARE OFTEN AMAZED AND OVERWHELMED BY HIS POWER AND LOVE.

Nevertheless, we need to understand how important our calling is. This is how Os Guinness describes it in his book The Call:

"H.L. Mencken wrote in an essay, 'Jews, from time immemorial, have been the chief dreamers of the human race, and beyond all comparison its greatest poets.' So as with calling itself, the visionary faith that calling inspires in followers of Christ goes back to the experience of the people of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. There is no god but God and no rest for anyone who has any god but God. God is on the move. Faith therefore means restlessness. The Caller may be unseen and the destination unknown, but those who follow His call have a voice above and vision ahead that subverts every status quo and unsettles every resting place."

God is working in our lives and He is calling us to accomplish great things. The questions are, "Are we listening and are we willing?"