

40 DAYS OF FAITH 2007
The Luke Daily Study Guide

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The Luke Daily Study Guide

Week 1

Introduction

Introducing the 40 Days Study Guide

It's become something of a tradition with us at the Vineyard—Greater Boston—to spend the six weeks before Easter doing something we call the 40 Days of Faith. You can learn more about the 40 Days of Faith in Dave Schmelzer's *User's Manual*, which you can usually find nearby wherever you picked up this guide. One element in the larger experience of the 40 Days is this six-week walk through one of the books of the Bible. One of the things I really love about these Bible study guides is that those of us who participate get the unique chance to study the Bible alone and together at the same time: the guides are designed to help you have a satisfying interaction with the Bible on your own each day; but because hundreds of other people are reading and thinking about the exact same daily Bible passage as you, it also gives you the fun opportunity to share your individual experience with the people around you. So, please join in yourself, share this guide with your friends, and talk together about what you find.

Whether you've never opened a Bible before in your life or you've been reading the Bible ever since you did memory verses as a kid, I've written this guide with you in mind. People of both varieties have told me that previous guides have been surprisingly helpful and interesting, occasionally thought-provoking, and not-too-infrequently relevant to their lives. I aim for at least the same this time around; you, of course, will have to be the judge as to whether I succeed.

Each day's guide is broken into three sections:

1. **The story for the day.** This year, we'll be studying the book of Luke, one of the Bible's four biographies of Jesus (called 'the gospels'). I've divided the book into 42 bite-size portions, meant to be short enough that you can comfortably read them in a single day, but long enough that each day is a satisfying stand-alone experience—the passages tend to be between about half a page and about a page long, as logic break points allow. For your convenience, I've included the Bible text of each day's story in *Today's New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). I hope you'll find it to be a very readable translation, with current vocabulary and a modern sensibility. As you read the story, try to read it from the perspectives of the participants in it. Really get inside the story. What's it like to go through this experience with these people?
2. **Points of Interest.** This section briefly explores aspects of the day's story that might be especially interesting or potentially confusing. It offers some historical notes and references that might help to interpret the story, frames some of the issues or questions, and gives suggestions of ways to understand the story and its meaning.
3. **Taking it home.** In this section, I offer some suggestions for how the day's reading might apply practically to our lives and the lives of the people around us. Much of the time, I'll propose a way we might want to respond to the passage through prayer; other times, I might propose a little experiment, or a conversation. Each day, we'll look at the passage from the perspective of three groups of people:
 - a. **For you and your family**—we'll explore how we and the people closest to us might identify with the story. We'll discuss implications that it has for how we look at ourselves, how we approach our lives, and how our family relates with God;

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- b. **For 'your six'**—think of six people in your life who live locally, who aren't currently followers of God (but who may be interested in God or exploring issues of faith), and for whom you'd like to see God do good things. What does this passage have to offer to those six friends? (For more about your six, see Dave Schmelzer's *40 Days User's Manual*.)
- c. **For our city**—we'll spend some time each day particularly focusing on what the day's story might mean for the cities of Boston and Cambridge and their surroundings. We'll take the opportunity to pray for Boston, and to think about our relationships to our city.

Introducing the book of Luke

As I've mentioned, we'll be studying the book of Luke. The book of Luke is one of the four biblical gospels. *Gospel* is a word from Old English which simply means 'good news.' The gospel writers told their stories in order to share the good news about Jesus' coming, his life, his teaching, his death, and his resurrection.

The book of Luke is part of a two-volume set with another biblical book, the book of Acts, which goes on to tell the story of the early church after Jesus' death. The author never gives his own name, but from very early in church history the book of Luke and Acts have been ascribed to (no big surprise here) Luke, a traveling companion of Paul, a famous early follower of Jesus who was largely responsible for spreading the good news of Jesus to Europe. Luke was part of a small company who worked with Paul, sharing the good news and starting churches throughout the Mediterranean world. Luke was a medical doctor by profession, and he was almost certainly the only non-Jewish author of the New Testament (and quite possibly of the entire Bible). The audience for Luke may have been cultured, highly-educated Greeks (Greek was the dominant culture of the eastern Roman empire): he writes in the same formal historical style that was fashionable in Greek society at the time. There is some evidence that Luke intended his writings for wide publication: the Gospel of Luke and Acts are almost exactly the same length, which happens to be the length that was common in scrolls used for publication (*IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* 187: InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1993).

Luke's gospel was probably written after Mark's gospel, another of the four biblical gospels, and is apparently based upon it. Luke follows the same basic storyline as Mark, and about 40 percent of the material is drawn directly from Mark. But Luke also has much material that isn't found in any of the other gospels. Luke's unique contributions show up particularly in his stories about Jesus' birth and the teachings of Jesus he shares with us. Perhaps because he is outside of Jewish society himself, he also shows a particular concern for Jesus' interaction with people who would be outsiders in ancient Jewish society: non-Jews, women, and the poor.

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Monday, February 26th

Luke 1: 1-25

1 Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. 3 With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. 5 In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. 6 Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. 7 But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both well advanced in years. 8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. 11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

13 But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. 16 Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

18 Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

19 The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. 22 When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

23 When his time of service was completed, he returned home. 24 After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. 25 "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

Points of Interest:

- 'Many have undertaken'—Luke is not the only or the first person to write the stories of Jesus. It seems that one of Luke's motivations for his own writing is to collect everything he has been taught into a single, orderly history.
- 'I myself have carefully investigated everything'—like any good historian today, Luke relies on primary sources and careful research. It is probable that Luke did his own fact-checking and interviewing of living eyewitnesses rather than only relying on what was already written (For instance, the very intimate tone of the stories involving Mary make me, at least, believe that Luke must have gotten some of the early stories directly

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from her, or from someone who knew her well). Luke expects that his audience would be very interested in the accuracy and reliability of his writing: they are not looking for sensational stories, but for a history they can trust.

- ‘most excellent Theophilus’—as I mentioned in the introduction, Luke probably intended his writing for publication. The aptly named Theophilus (‘god-lover’ in Greek) was probably his patron and sponsor. ‘Most excellent’ is a technical title indicating that Theophilus is part of the Roman nobility (*IVP Bible Background Commentary* 187)—something like, ‘Count Theophilus.’ It is also possible that Luke is using the title as an honorary compliment (*ibid*).
- ‘was also a descendant of Aaron’—in other words, Elizabeth is also from a priestly family. Jewish priests were all descended from Aaron, the brother of Moses. The priests were in charge of the worship ceremonies at the temple in Jerusalem.
- ‘observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly’—this does not necessarily mean that they were thought to be absolutely perfect; rather, it means that they consistently based their life on following God’s instruction.
- ‘But they were childless’—it’s surprising to Luke that such a righteous couple would be childless. Children were considered a special blessing from God; inevitably, the converse also came to be thought of as true: childlessness was a punishment from God. Luke is making clear here that Elizabeth and Zechariah are not being punished. Why, then, would these faithful people not be given children?
Actually, Elizabeth is the latest member of a small but significant Biblical club: devout women who are not able to have children until long after all natural hope of becoming pregnant is gone. The first among these women is Sarah, Abraham’s wife, who, like Elizabeth, does not have a child until she is beyond child-bearing years. Other members of the club are Rachel (Genesis 29 and 30), Hannah (I Samuel 1 and 2), and the unnamed mother of Samson (Judges 13). The stories of these previous miracle mothers will be referred to numerous times during Luke’s account of the pregnancies of Elizabeth and Mary.
- ‘to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense’—the altar of incense was in the Holy Place, the area of the temple to which only priests could go. One of the jobs of the priests was to burn incense every morning and evening (Exodus 30: 7-8).
- ‘your prayer has been heard’—the incense symbolized the prayers of the people. As Zechariah is tending to the people’s prayers, he hears from the angel that his own prayer has been answered. My guess is that this is a prayer that Zechariah actually stopped praying a long time ago: his wife has probably been too old to have children for a while, and it would be an exceptional person who would continue to pray for a child after that. Nonetheless, God has not forgotten Zechariah’s prayer.
- ‘he will be great in the sight of the Lord’—the eventual children of the childless women I mentioned earlier all end up playing important roles in the history of God’s people: Sarah’s son Isaac is the forefather of all Jews, and the person through whom God intends to bring blessing to all of the families of the world; Rachel’s son Joseph—of Technicolor Dream Coat fame—ends up saving much of the ancient near east from famine; Hannah’s son Samuel becomes the model for all of the ancient Jewish prophets; and Samson—the lover of Delilah and the man whose great strength depended on his long hair—saves the Israelites from annihilation at the hands of their enemies. Elizabeth’s son John also has great promise on his life. He has perhaps a greater role than all of them: he is to be the herald who comes just before the long-expected return of the Lord, when he comes with the power to rescue his people from their troubles.

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- 'He is never to take wine or other fermented drink'—this is just like the instructions given before Samson's birth (Judges 13:4)
- 'in the spirit and power of Elijah'—Elijah is a great prophet from Israel's history, known for calling the people of Israel back to the worship of God when they had turned away to other gods. At the end of his life, Elijah is taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot. Hundreds of years after Elijah's time, and hundreds of years before John's birth, the prophet Malachi predicted that Elijah would return again before the 'great and dreadful day of the LORD' (Malachi 4:5-6). John is not literally Elijah, but will have his 'spirit and power': he will be like Elijah in his calling and in the power he receives from God to pursue it (A similar thing happened to Elijah's protégé, Elisha [2 Kings 2: 9, 10, and 15]).
- 'and I have been sent to speak to you'—I think Gabriel is essentially saying, 'What more could I do to prove it to you?' Gabriel points out that he is, in fact, an angel sent by God to speak to Zechariah. Shouldn't the appearance of an angel be proof enough of the miracle the angel is predicting? Isn't that the whole point of sending an angel?
- 'now you will be silent'—Gabriel dramatically applies the old proverb, 'If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all,' by taking away Zechariah's power of speech after he speaks his doubting words.
- 'taken away my disgrace'—Elizabeth is quoting her predecessor Rachel (Genesis 30:23). Finally, the stigma has been erased; there will be no more lurking suspicions that she is being punished by God.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* Luke's hope for Theophilus was that reading Luke's history would give Theophilus greater certainty in his belief in Jesus. As you begin your own reading of this history, ask God that it would be a faith-growing experience. Are there particular ways that you need assurance about Jesus? Consider mentioning those things specifically to God. Ask that you would get the assurance you need sometime in the next forty days.
- *For your six:* Do any of your six have a deep desire that has long gone unfulfilled? Ask God to show his care for them by satisfying their longing.
- *For our city:* Zechariah is performing an old religious ritual when it suddenly and surprisingly takes on new life. Pray that everyone participating in religious ceremonies in our city would have a similar experience. Ask that these faith traditions too would come alive with fresh and vibrant new connections with God.

Tuesday, February 27th

Luke 1: 26-56

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

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35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. 37 For no word from God will ever fail."

38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me according to your word." Then the angel left her.

39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

46 And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

50 His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful

55 to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors."

56 Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Points of Interest:

- 'a town in Galilee'—Judea and Galilee were the two Jewish regions in Roman Palestine. Judeans thought of Galilee the same way people on the East Coast think of anywhere in the middle of the country: Galilee was considered backward, provincial, and far away from anything important. The prophet Isaiah—writing hundreds of years earlier—predicted that despised Galilee would become a place of honor (Isaiah 9:1). Gabriel is about to put the fulfillment of that prophecy in motion.
- 'a descendant of David'—David was the Jewish national hero, famous as a warrior, a king, and a worshipper of God. David's reign was Israel's golden age. David's family had not been in power for a very long time: the Jews had been under foreign domination for 600 years, except for a brief period of independence when the high priests ruled. But I imagine David's family still retained some respect, both out of

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reverence for the glorious past and out of the hope (supported by many prophecies) that David's kingdom would one day be restored.

- 'You will conceive and give birth to a son'—another of Isaiah's prophecies says, 'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel [which means, 'God with us']' (Isaiah 7:14). On a certain level, this prophecy was fulfilled during Isaiah's own time: Isaiah is simply saying that something he has predicted will happen in the length of time it takes for a young woman to become pregnant, have a child, and wean the child. But there's another layer to this prophecy; it looks forward to a time when, through the birth of a child, God who seems far away will draw very near—he will be with us. Gabriel is saying that that deeper layer of the prophecy would now be fulfilled. This humble, young Galilean woman would play a part in, not just a miraculous birth, but in God himself living among his people.
- 'The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David'—yet another of Isaiah's prophecies is referenced here. In fact, it's the same prophecy that mentions Galilee's rise in status. It might be worth quoting a couple of verses (you might recognize them from Handel's 'Messiah'):

For to us a child is born
 To us a son is given,
 And the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and peace
 There will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
 And over his kingdom,
Establishing and upholding it
 With justice and righteousness
 From that time on and forever (Isaiah 9: 6-7)

Mary's child, because of Mary's marriage to Joseph, will be an adoptive descendant of David, and he will be the one who finally does bring back the glory days of David. Even better, while David's kingdom disintegrated shortly after his death—and even ended with something of a whimper toward the end of David's own reign—Jesus' reign will never end and his kingdom will never fall.

You might have noticed that we've mentioned the ancient Jewish prophets—and particularly Isaiah—quite a bit the past couple of days. At the beginning of his story, Luke is strongly painting a picture for us of a people who have been waiting for a very long time for God to come and intervene in their circumstances. The central story of the Old Testament (the part of the Bible written before Jesus' arrival) is the story of the exodus: when the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt, God heard their prayers and through his mighty acts rescued them and eventually brought them safely to their own land. Toward the end of Old Testament history, the people of Israel are once again in captivity, but the biblical prophets predict that God will return once again to rescue them. By the time of Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary, the people have been waiting around 600 years for this second rescue attempt. Our story begins at the indescribably exciting moment when God finally begins to put his new rescue plan into action. Luke's story—and the rest of the New Testament (the part of the Bible written after Jesus' coming)—is a description of this new dramatic rescue attempt: who is being

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rescued? from what are they being rescued? and how are they going to be rescued? The Old Testament prophets give us some hints as to what to expect, but God has some surprises in store for us as well. One of the first things we learn—predicted by Isaiah, but still surprising—is that the instrument of God's plan will be the baby of this young, Galilean woman.

- 'the house of Jacob'—another name for the Jews. The forefather of the Jews was Jacob, also known as Israel. The Israelites came to be called Jews when most of the tribes of Israel were conquered and dispersed, leaving Judah (the ancestral lands of two of the original twelve tribes) as the only remaining Israelite homeland.
- 'How will this be?'—just like Zechariah, Mary responds to Gabriel with a question, but her question is quite different. Zechariah asks for further assurance that the angel's words will happen; Mary simply wants to know how they will come about. Amazingly, she doesn't express any doubt at all that her child will be the promised son of David, and will reign forever; she merely wonders how God will overcome the practical barrier of her virginity to bring it about.
- 'So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God'—Jesus is not only the adoptive heir of David, but also a miraculous son of God. Jesus is given life by the Spirit (or 'breath') of God, just like Adam, the first human being God created, was (Genesis 2:7).
- 'Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit'—the Holy Spirit is the essence of God, sent to interact with human beings, conferring on them supernatural powers or abilities. Our word 'inspired' comes from this idea that we've been breathed on or somehow empowered by another spirit. Here, the Holy Spirit inspires Elizabeth with supernatural knowledge about Mary's child and with words of blessing and praise.
- 'and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior'—Mary models her song of praise after Hannah's song after the birth of her son Samuel (1 Samuel 1:1-10). The theme of both songs is that God sees, remembers, and promotes those who look small and forgotten.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* When the angel calls Mary 'highly favored,' she's initially confused. She doesn't think of herself as special, and she's surprised that God would take such notice of her. It seems to me that Mary's an example for all of us: maybe we're all highly favored by God. Of course, Mary inhabits a privileged place in history: she's the one and only mother of Jesus. But the whole point of Mary's story is that God is willing and able to do astounding things for and through humble, ordinary people. Today, with your family or household or friends, try on for size the idea that God notices you, likes you, and has big plans for you. Imitate Elizabeth by proclaiming God's favor over one another, maybe just by saying something like, 'You know what, God really likes you,' to someone else in your house at least once today.
- *For your six:* Mary's and Elizabeth's recent experiences are made all the more meaningful by the fact that they are able to share them with one another. Pray for the friendships of your six. Ask God to give them good company as they go through life. Pray particularly that God will provide them with friends with whom they can talk about their spiritual experiences. You might even want to pray that God will help you to be good spiritual friends for your six. Ask God to make you a source of support and encouragement in the lives of your six, just like Elizabeth is for Mary.
- *For our city:* In this passage, God inaugurates a new era of great things for the people of Israel. God is going to be at work among them in ways they haven't seen for hundreds of years. Pray the same thing for our cities of Boston and Cambridge: ask

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God to be at work in our cities in ways none of us have ever seen, even in ways that it's hard for us to believe he would still act.

Wednesday, February 28th

Luke 1: 57-80

57 When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, 60 but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."

61 They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."

62 Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. 63 He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. 66 Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

67 His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

68 "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David

70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

71 salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—

72 to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,

73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear

75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,

78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

79 to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the path of peace."

80 And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

Points of Interest:

- 'Then they made signs to his father'—apparently, Zechariah was not just mute, but deaf as well; or maybe the neighbors just got confused.
- 'Immediately his mouth was opened'—the very next words out of Zechariah's mouth after his doubting question nine months ago are words of praise when God proves that

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he has done what he promised. After nine months of silence, Zechariah has a lot of words stored up, and they come out in a song of praise and prophecy.

- 'a horn of salvation'—horns are symbols of strength and power. An animal uses its horns to defend itself and fight its rivals. God is similarly providing them with someone or something to defend them.
- 'the oath he swore to our father Abraham'—Zechariah is probably referring to God's promise in Genesis 15 that he would free Abraham's descendants from slavery and give them their own land.
- 'to rescue us from the hand of our enemies'—it would be natural to assume that these enemies are the Romans. Just like he once freed them from the Egyptians, he would now free Israel from the Romans. This political interpretation was, in fact, very common in Zechariah's time. However, it doesn't seem that it is what Zechariah has in mind. The specific enemies he mentions are sins and death.
- 'you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him'—as I mentioned in Monday's passage, the prophet Malachi says Elijah will precede the return of the Lord. Isaiah also speaks of a messenger who would go ahead of the Lord to prepare his way (Isaiah 40: 3-5); we'll talk more about the Isaiah passage on Friday.
- 'to shine on those living in darkness'—another reference to Isaiah 9: 'The people walking in darkness/have seen a great light' (Isaiah 9:2).

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* there's something fun and powerful about praising God aloud. Zechariah probably had an extra dose of energy in his praise, because he hadn't been able to speak at all for so long; but maybe all of us could benefit from imitating him. I know that when I choose to speak aloud about God's goodness (even when I'm just talking to myself), I almost always find my spirits lifted, and I have a feeling that more of God's goodness is being unleashed in my life. If there's even a hint of something good in your life that you feel you could thank God for, try thanking him aloud. You could use your own words, or use Mary's song from yesterday or a psalm like Psalm 100 as a guide. Don't just read silently or think it, but speak out; I, at least, find it makes quite a big difference. If you're feeling extra bold, tell someone else how good you think God is; if you do, I suggest you go ahead and use your own words, rather than belting out Mary's song at an unsuspecting listener.
- *For your six:* Elizabeth and Zechariah's faith causes them to do something unusual in naming their child. This strange choice intrigues their friends, provoking wonder and curiosity. Elizabeth and Zechariah's willingness to do the unexpected seems to open everyone up to the possibility that God might do something extraordinary. Have you made a strange faith choice recently? Do any of your six know about it? If so, how did they respond?
- *For our city:* this supernatural birth is not just a private affair. The whole neighborhood is celebrating Elizabeth and Zechariah's good fortune, debating together about what the child should be named, and discussing together what all of these things might mean. It's one of our hopes for our church that we would be known widely as a place where supernatural things happen. Already, we've seen some pretty remarkable things: people being healed of sicknesses, unexpected provision of money or jobs, and all sorts of other things. Pray that our church would continue to see more of God's supernatural activity, and that it wouldn't just be our own private experience but the talk of the town.

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Thursday, March 1st

Luke 2

1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register.

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

21 On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

22 When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), 24 and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

30 For my eyes have seen your salvation,

31 which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel."

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33 The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

36 There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then had been a widow for eighty-four years. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. 38 Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

39 When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. 40 And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

41 Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. 42 When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Festival, according to the custom. 43 After the Festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. 44 Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."

49 "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" 50 But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

51 Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52 And as Jesus grew up, he increased in wisdom and in favor with God and people.

Points of Interest:

- 'while Quirinius was governor of Syria'—while we might say something like, 'Back in 1975,' it was standard during Luke's day to place events by referring to the ruler who was in power. Luke will do the same at the beginning of tomorrow's passage.
- 'to Bethlehem the town of David'—Bethlehem was David's home town, and Joseph is of David's family; but that wouldn't be reason enough for Joseph to go to Bethlehem for the census. People were required to pay tax where they owned property, not in their family's ancestral home; so Joseph must have owned property in Bethlehem (*IVP Bible Background Commentary* 193). Regardless of the exact reason for Joseph and Mary's trip to Bethlehem, it does call to mind yet another old prophecy:

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are of old,
from ancient times (Micah 5:2).

This future-but-somehow-ancient ruler from Bethlehem cannot be David, because Micah is speaking long after David's time. From Nazareth, but born in Bethlehem, Jesus is both the Prince of Peace expected from Galilee (Isaiah 9) and the ancient ruler

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to come from Bethlehem (Micah 5). All of Israel's hopes for a glorious restoration are coming together in this child.

- 'He went there to register with Mary'—returning home with an already pregnant fiancée could have been embarrassing for Joseph; he and Mary could have avoided scandal by keeping Mary quietly out of sight somewhere. Perhaps Mary makes the trip because she is also required to pay tax in Bethlehem (*IVP Bible Background Commentary* 193), or they don't want to be apart when Mary is so close to giving birth. Or maybe they've simply decided not to act ashamed when they have nothing to be ashamed of.
- 'there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby'—since shepherds lived a semi-nomadic life, on the open countryside much of the time with their flocks, they were outsiders, and considered a bit uncivilized (*IVP Bible Background Commentary* 194). They might be a surprising choice as the first to hear the great news that the Savior has arrived. Maybe the shepherds were told because this was good news that simply had to be shared with someone, right away, and they were awake while everyone else was asleep. Maybe they were told because this good news was for everyone, including—even especially—the humble (see Mary's song from Tuesday's passage). It's also worth noting that the Bible holds shepherds in higher esteem than society in general: Moses, the great deliverer of the Israelites from Egypt, was a shepherd; so was king David; and the ruler who is to come from Bethlehem is called a strong and majestic shepherd (Micah 5:4). So, maybe the shepherds are told the good news about Jesus first because he himself will be, like David, a shepherd as well as a king.
- 'he is the Messiah, the Lord'—*Messiah* means, 'anointed,' or, 'commissioned by God for a purpose.' It's the term the Jews came to use for God's special agent, sent to restore everything to the way it should be. They formed their idea of the Messiah by collecting all of the prophecies we've been referring to, as well as several others and a bunch of the Psalms, into something of a composite picture of a great, but somewhat enigmatic, ruler or savior to come at the end of days. In these prophecies, like in the angel's pronouncement here, it's sometimes a bit unclear as to whether it is God himself coming, or a human being whom he has chosen.
- 'a great company of the heavenly host appeared'—the Roman emperors had choirs who would sing their praises (*IVP Bible Background Commentary* 194); Jesus has a choir of angels to sing his.
- 'the baby, who was lying in the manger'—Jesus' birth is a disorienting mixture of overwhelming majesty and humble simplicity. On the one hand there are angel choirs proclaiming universal peace; on the other hand, there's a poor girl's baby, lying in a feeding trough in a stable. I think we can expect that this plan of God's will keep us on our toes.
- 'Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord'—this ceremony is to remember that God spared the Israelites when he brought a plague on the firstborn of Egypt during the exodus (Exodus 11, 13).
- 'a pair of doves or two young pigeons'—they offer the birds because they are too poor to offer a lamb (Leviticus 12:8).
- 'you may now dismiss your servant in peace'—by supernatural insight, Simeon recognizes the 8-day old Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. Now that he has gotten a glimpse of God's rescue plan put into effect, he can die happy. He needs nothing else from life.
- 'prepared in the sight of all nations' —Zechariah's song yesterday focused on how the new David would fulfill Israel's hopes for rescue. In Simeon's song, we learn that Jesus'

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arrival isn't good news for the Jews alone. The whole world should pay attention, because Jesus has come for the non-Jews (that is, Gentiles) as well as the Jews. This expansion of the savior's mission beyond Israel is something of a minor theme in the writings of the Jewish prophets; our old friend Isaiah, for instance, writes, 'I will also make you a light for the Gentiles/that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth' (Isaiah 49:6). But in Jesus' ministry, and particularly in the way the non-Jewish Luke focuses the story, it become a very, very major theme.

- 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles'—the savior brings a new brightness to the life of people who hear about him.
- 'And a sword will pierce your own soul too'—while Jesus' coming is good news for everyone, his mission is not easy. It will be a difficult thing for a mother to watch.
- 'very old'—presumably over a hundred years old, since she was married ninety-one years ago. She has been on the lookout for God's rescue for a long time.
- 'Thinking he was in their company'—they were probably traveling with an entire caravan of people who had gone up to Jerusalem for the festival. It might be easy to assume that Jesus was amongst the other older boys in the group.
- 'But they did not understand what he was saying to them'—his parents don't quite seem to know what to do with all of the amazing things that happened around Jesus' birth. Or, over the twelve years since his birth, they've forgotten that Jesus is God's special agent of salvation, and begun to think of him as just their boy.
- 'and was obedient to them'—the fact that he is the son of God does not lead Jesus to despise his earthly parents. He shows them honor, just like the Ten Commandments recommend (Exodus 20:12)

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* Simeon and Anna are graceful examples of something that's very hard to do: wait well. There's a long gap for them between God's promise and its fulfillment, and they live in that gap without bitterness and without giving up. They seem to draw closer to God and to hold more firmly to his promise as they wait. Is there something you are waiting for? How has your experience of waiting gone? What would it look like to wait well? Is there anything you need from God in order to help you wait? Consider using this period of uncomfortable waiting to draw nearer to God, even if it's simply by telling him how it feels to wait.
- *For your six:* The shepherds were simply going about their business when the supernatural broke into their routine, in the form of an angelic choir. This supernatural interruption brought an extra dose of joy and of meaning to their night. Pray that the lives of your six would be similarly seasoned with the supernatural. Ask God to speak to them in dreams, or to bring strange coincidences their way, or to answer a prayer when they're not expecting it.
- *For our city:* Simeon speaks in this passage about the savior's arrival being good news for the entire world, not just for the little group who knew about him already. In Simeon's day, the little group was the Jews; perhaps today that little group is church people. In Boston and Cambridge in particular, that little group is quite little: no more than ten percent of the population are regular churchgoers. While there's plenty to pray about for the ten percent who are in churches, today pray for the ninety percent of our population who aren't churchgoers. Pray that they would encounter Jesus in a way that brightens up their lives.

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Friday, March 2nd

Luke 3

1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— 2 during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.

5 Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.

6 And all people will see God's salvation.' "

7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

10 "What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

11 John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"

13 "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

14 Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?"

He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. 16 John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18 And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

19 But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, 20 Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

21 When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened 22 and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

23 Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph,

the son of Heli, 24 the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, the son of Melki, the son of Jannai, the son of Joseph, 25 the son of Mattathias, the son of Amos, the son of Nahum, the son of Esli, the son of Naggai, 26 the son of Maath, the son of Mattathias, the son of Semein, the son of Josek, the son of Joda, 27 the son of Joanan, the son of Rhesa, the son of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, the son of Neri, 28 the son of Melki, the son of Addi,

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the son of Cosam, the son of Elmadam, the son of Er, 29 the son of Joshua, the son of Eliezer, the son of Jorim, the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, 30 the son of Simeon, the son of Judah, the son of Joseph, the son of Jonam, the son of Eliakim, 31 the son of Melea, the son of Menna, the son of Mattatha, the son of Nathan, the son of David, 32 the son of Jesse, the son of Obed, the son of Boaz, the son of Salmon, the son of Nahshon, 33 the son of Amminadab, the son of Ram, the son of Hezron, the son of Perez, the son of Judah, 34 the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, the son of Terah, the son of Nahor, 35 the son of Serug, the son of Reu, the son of Peleg, the son of Eber, the son of Shelah, 36 the son of Cainan, the son of Arphaxad, the son of Shem, the son of Noah, the son of Lamech, 37 the son of Methuselah, the son of Enoch, the son of Jared, the son of Mahalalel, the son of Kenan, 38 the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.

Points of Interest:

- 'during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas'—there was supposed to be only one high priest who served for life, but Annas had been deposed by the Romans (*Illustrated Bible Dictionary* 68; InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1998). Caiaphas, his son-in-law, is the new Roman appointee, but Annas is still high priest in Jewish eyes.
- 'in the wilderness'—the wilderness is a place of spiritual preparation. Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness, as did the people of Israel on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land. The prophet Elijah also went out into the wilderness, to separate himself from corrupt politics and to hide from a king who was trying to kill him. John may be imitating his predecessor Elijah, or even self-consciously fulfilling his role as 'the voice of one calling in the wilderness' (Isaiah 40, see below).
- 'a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'—repentance is recalibration, or turning around. John is calling the people to re-orient themselves away from their sins. The particular sins John focuses on are sins of considering oneself better than others by taking pride in status, or by taking advantage of position. As Mary says in her song earlier, God lifts up the humble. People who lift themselves up are heading in the opposite direction from God's blessing. All it takes, though, to be forgiven this error is to turn around.
- 'the words of Isaiah the prophet'—this is Isaiah 40: 3-5. It's John's job description. He prepares the path for God's salvation, by warning people to get rid of anything that would get in God's way. This is why John is calling people to repent: not to condemn them, but to help make them ready for the good things God wants to give them.
- 'Produce fruit in keeping with repentance'—the repentance John is recommending is not just words or intellectual beliefs; it should have a practical outcome in their lives.
- 'coming out to be baptized by him'—baptism was a ritual cleansing performed by gentiles who wished to convert to Judaism, but John is baptizing people who are already Jews. Essentially, he's saying that these Jews need to convert to Judaism. Amazingly, crowds of people submit to this crazy requirement. They must recognize him as 'the voice calling in the wilderness.' They realize that John has been sent to prepare the way ahead of the Lord, and they trust that he knows what he's doing. By baptizing these Jewish listeners, John is demonstrating that the Lord is coming to rescue those who make an active choice to welcome him, not to rescue by default anyone who happens to have the right religious or family background.
- 'Even tax collectors'—tax collectors are never all that popular, but tax collectors in Roman Palestine were especially disliked: they got rich off of collaborating with the Romans and robbing fellow Jews. They were roughly analogous to gangsters running a protection racket. But John has awakened a spiritual sensitivity even in these worldly, hardened, corrupt men.

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- ‘the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie’—John is saying he’s not good enough to be the slave of the one who is coming. The crowds are so impressed by what they’ve seen of John that they are hopeful he might be the promised rescuer, but they haven’t seen anything yet.
- ‘He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit’—John has been immersing people in mere water, but the one who is coming will immerse them in the very presence of God, a substance far more rare and valuable. We’ve already seen the Holy Spirit at work quite a bit in Luke’s story, inspiring prophecy in several people and causing Mary’s pregnancy; but the Holy Spirit falling on people was quite rare in the history of God’s interaction with his people. Before now, only a handful of prophets had ever been filled with the Holy Spirit in this way. But what Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Simeon have experienced is just a small taste of what is to come. Soon, many people will be positively drenched in the Holy Spirit.
- ‘he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire’—fire is very useful, and also dangerous. This baptism in the Holy Spirit is not something to take for granted; if you’re not careful, you could get burned. Chaff, by the way, is what remains after the kernel has been separated out of the wheat. The coming of the Lord is like a harvest. Like any farmer, the Lord will keep what’s useful from his crops, and get rid of the rest. John’s message sounds pretty severe, and there certainly is a lot of sober warning to it. But Luke also calls it good news: his listeners still have the opportunity to make sure that they are the wheat, and not the chaff.
- ‘when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch’—Herod the tetrarch is the ruler of Galilee. Tetrarchs were a sort of lesser client king (a quarter-king) under the Romans. John’s model Elijah also got into trouble for criticizing his king’s relationship with his wife. Herod does exactly what John has been warning people not to do: rather than repenting, he abuses his position to punish John. It doesn’t turn out well for Herod: his first wife’s father defeats him in war; the Romans depose him; and he’s sent away into ignominious exile.
- ‘the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form’—while John is baptizing Jesus with water, God baptizes him with the Holy Spirit. Jesus first receives from God what he will later pass on to others.
- ‘you are my son’—one way to think of Jesus’ baptism is that it is his formal commissioning into the role of Messiah. Remember that *Messiah* means, ‘anointed.’ Among the kings of David’s line, rather than a coronation ceremony they would have an anointing ceremony, in which a priest or a prophet would pour oil over the new king’s head. The oil symbolized God’s favor on the king and his authority being given to the king. At Jesus’ baptism, God himself anoints Jesus with the Holy Spirit rather than oil, and directly proclaims his favor. Jesus is the true Ruler from David’s Line. David and all of his other royal descendants were only symbols of the true king to come.
- ‘with you I am well pleased’—everyone else repents of their sins as they are baptized. At Jesus’ baptism, God proclaims that he has no need to repent.
- ‘the son of Adam, the son of God’—genealogies were cited in histories in order to connect the subject with well-known heroes. In this genealogy, we do indeed see that Jesus is in the lineage of David, and of Abraham. However, the genealogy doesn’t stop with either of these great men. Instead, it extends all the way to Adam. It’s as if the point of this genealogy is not to connect Jesus to the heroes of the past, but to connect

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them—and all of us—to him: everyone is in Jesus' family. His story is our family history.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* In today's passage, John calls his listeners to go through the steps of becoming Jews, even though they're already Jews. It's quite a humbling thing. In fact, God seems uncomfortably willing to ask us to do things that are very humbling all the time. Has God put something humble in mind for you? I'm not talking about simply feeling more humble, but about actually taking an action that seems embarrassingly basic. Maybe it's admitting that you don't understand something, or confessing that you've done something stupid, or re-learning a lesson that you really should know by now. Ask God for the boldness to take that humble action, and the faith to believe that when you do he will raise you up.
- *For your six:* Just like Herod, out of pride or even out of fear, we can be tempted to defend our bad choices and mistakes. Doing so only ever makes it worse. Pray for your six, that they would be quick to acknowledge when they're in the wrong.
- *For our city:* If John is right, then good things happen in a place where people are generous, honest, and fair. Pray that these qualities would characterize our city.

Saturday, March 3rd

Luke 4:1-30

1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'People do not live on bread alone.'"

5 The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. 7 If you worship me, it will all be yours."

8 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

9 The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. 10 For it is written:

" 'He will command his angels concerning you
to guard you carefully;

11 they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

12 Jesus answered, "It is said: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

13 When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. 15 He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,

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to set the oppressed free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. 21 He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked.

23 Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.' "

24 "Truly I tell you," he continued, "prophets are not accepted in their hometowns. 25 I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. 26 Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. 27 And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian."

28 All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. 30 But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

Points of Interest:

- 'led by the Spirit'—Jesus himself is guided by the Holy Spirit. God doesn't send Jesus the Holy Spirit at the baptism just for the sake of a cool visual effect. God gives Jesus the Holy Spirit because Jesus will need power and wisdom from the Holy Spirit in order to fulfill his mission.
- 'for forty days he was tempted by the devil'—just like Adam and Eve in the garden, Jesus faces temptation from the devil. The devil is an evil spiritual being, the enemy of God; and his primary weapons throughout the Bible are lies, accusations, and temptation. In the garden with Adam and Eve, he succeeds in making an incredibly destructive choice look like the most logical, most attractive thing to do. Here he tries the same strategy, but this time he fails.
The temptation lasts a full forty days, but Luke only tells us about the grand finale. In this finale, the devil tempts Jesus with three things that sound pretty good, but are really only cheap imitations of what Jesus really wants. Jesus sees through the deceptions, and decides to wait for God to give him the real thing, rather than trying to grab the copy for himself now.
- 'People do not live on bread alone'—Jesus is quoting Moses, who goes on to say, 'but on every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Deuteronomy 8:3). Jesus is, in fact, choosing to live here by God's word, rather than by bread.
- 'it has been given to me'—this isn't quite true. It's more like he's stolen it, from Adam and Eve who were supposed to have dominion over the whole earth, but lost it when they succumbed to the devil's temptation
- 'For it is written'—the devil is clever. Since Jesus has been turning to the Bible for his answers, the devil decides to try to use the Bible for his temptation.
- 'Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit'—having withstood the attack of his strongest enemy, Jesus is now emboldened to go on the offensive, beginning his active ministry.

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- 'teaching in their synagogues'—the synagogues were—and still are—local congregations where the people would gather on a weekly basis to praise God, pray together, and be taught from the Bible.
- 'the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him'—an attendant chose what scroll to read from, and the reader then chose what passage to read.
- 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'—John's teaching was all about what was coming—in the near future, but still in the future. Jesus' teaching is about today. There's no longer any need to wait. What they've been waiting for is now here, right in front of them.
John's job description was to go ahead of the Lord to prepare the way for his coming. Jesus' job description is to bring good news, freedom, healing, and favor to anyone who needs them.
- 'prophets are not accepted in their hometowns'—from Jesus' reaction, you get the sense that they're being patronizing. They're amazed, but their amazement is amusement and disbelief that Joseph's son could speak so well. It's not amazement at the wonderful thing that is being offered to them, or amazement that prophecy is coming true right in front of their eyes. They are too familiar with Jesus to treat him seriously. Jesus seems to go so far as to say that a total stranger, a foreigner even, might have a better chance of clearly seeing who he is than these people who think they know him so well.
- 'But he walked right through the crowd'—either the anger of the crowd disperses quickly, or Jesus has an aura about him that keeps them from actually doing him harm.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* The devil will try to fool you sometime today into accepting less than God wants to give you. He's clever, and what he offers can often seem pretty good. Ask God to give you the eyes to see through the devil's deception.
- *For your six:* Jesus has good news, freedom, healing, and favor available today for whoever needs them. Pray that your six would get at least tastes of each of these things today.
- *For our city:* The people of Nazareth get themselves into a bit of trouble today when they start to compare themselves enviously with the other towns around them. Pray that our city would be free from envy, particularly as the baseball season begins.

Sunday, March 4th

Luke 4:31-5:11

31 Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath he taught the people. 32 They were amazed at his teaching, because his words had authority.

33 In the synagogue there was a man possessed by a demon, an evil spirit. He cried out at the top of his voice, 34 "Go away! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"

35 "Be quiet!" Jesus said sternly. "Come out of him!" Then the demon threw the man down before them all and came out without injuring him.

36 All the people were amazed and said to each other, "What words these are! With authority and power he gives orders to evil spirits and they come out!" 37 And the news about him spread throughout the surrounding area.

38 Jesus left the synagogue and went to the home of Simon. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked Jesus to help her. 39 So he bent over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. She got up at once and began to wait on them.

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40 At sunset, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them. 41 Moreover, demons came out of many people, shouting, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew he was the Messiah.

42 At daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. 43 But he said, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent." 44 And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea.

5:1 One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. 2 He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. 3 He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

5 Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

6 When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. 7 So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" 9 For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, 10 and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." 11 So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Points of Interest:

- 'because his words had authority'—the main difference between Jesus' words and the words of other teachers is that his words are powerful. They don't just add knowledge, they cause action: people are rescued from the clutches of evil spiritual beings or healed of diseases when he speaks.
- 'I know who you are'—demons are evil spiritual beings associated with the devil and constantly on the lookout to do people harm. Perhaps this demon knows who Jesus is because he's heard about Jesus' showdown with the devil. Or maybe he can just tell somehow by looking at him. In any case, sadly, this demon recognizes him for who he is, when the people of Nazareth could not.
- 'Come out of him!'—Jesus is proclaiming freedom to a prisoner, just as he said in his teaching in Nazareth.
- 'At sunset'—at sunset, the Sabbath, which is the day of rest, would end and it would be permissible to do work, like carrying sick people.
- 'laying his hands on each one, he healed them'—Jesus is showing what it means for him to be the savior. He is not saving these people in some vague, ethereal way. He is quite tangibly rescuing them from disease, and from the influence of evil spirits who are doing them harm.
- 'would not allow them to speak'—maniacal-sounding, ranting demons would not exactly be Jesus' chosen spokespeople. Plus, he seems to prefer to demonstrate who he is.
- 'Jesus went out to a solitary place'—maybe he snuck out early just to beat traffic, but it sounds to me like he went to find a quiet place to pray. It's quite possible that, just as

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he started his ministry being led by the Spirit into the wilderness, he started his day by being led by the Spirit to a quiet place, to receive instructions from God for the day.

- 'they tried to keep him from leaving them'—of course, it's natural that they would want this experience to continue, but Jesus' mission is bigger than one town. He wants to spread his good news as wide as possible.
- 'in the synagogues of Judea'—he moves on from Galilee to Judea.
- 'taught the people from the boat'—to avoid being mobbed, and to use the water to help him project his voice.
- 'let down the nets for a catch'—Simon has just washed these nets. And besides, as he says, he's been fishing all night and hasn't caught a thing. After a miserable night of work, he's probably ready to go home. Nonetheless, he acts on Jesus' word.
- 'so full that they began to sink'—I'm sure no one had even heard of such a large catch of fish that nets were breaking and boats swamping. It's a catch of fish specifically designed to boggle the mind of fishermen.
- 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!'—Simon realizes that he's in the presence of someone very special, and it's a little hard for him to grasp. Maybe he's afraid that, being so near someone so holy, he will be burned like chaff, to borrow a phrase from John.
- 'from now on you will fish for people'—Simon is not going to be destroyed or punished. He's going to be transformed. Because of his humble response, Simon is raised up.
- 'left everything and followed him'—Jesus himself has just been fishing for people. He's used a huge catch of fish to catch himself some fishermen. After nearly swamping their boats trying to haul the fish in, they just leave them on the shore to be with Jesus instead. They realize that the person who led them to such a catch is more valuable than the catch.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* Jesus wants to show you that he cares about you. What do you need from Jesus today? Do you need something encouraging to happen at work? Do you need a sick relative to start feeling better? Do you just need him to assure you that he's not angry at you? Ask Jesus for that thing you need.
- *For your six:* We're not really used to thinking about demons, and most of our images of demonic possession come from horror movies. It's kind of hard to take something like that seriously, or to imagine that such a creature might actually be affecting your six. But look at it this way: do any of your six seem to be consistently trapped by negative thoughts or compulsions? Maybe these are even things that don't seem to fit with the rest of what you know of the person's character. Perhaps there's an evil spirit at the root of it. Try asking Jesus to free your friend from the power of that spirit, and see what happens.
- *For our city:* Pray for the sick people of our city to be made well. Pray particularly for our Healing Rooms program. Pray that sick people from all over our city would find their way to the Healing Rooms, just as the sick people of Capernaum found their way to Jesus; and pray that they would leave the Healing Rooms feeling better.