

How many of you have seen video of the attack on the Twin Trade Towers on September 11? In a sentence or two would you tell us one of your enduring memories of what you saw and of how you experienced that day?

That prepares you for something I want you to know about the Gospel of Luke. Look at Luke 1:1-4. Luke wrote this: **Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us.** Interest in Jesus' life ran deep among the first Christians. They wanted to know anything they could find out about what Jesus said and did and what kind of man He was. It's a common human desire.

But how did they get their information? Luke tells us in verse two where he got his. Stories about Jesus **were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.** You may think that the gospels are stories like the Harry Potter stories – really good stories maybe, but stories someone just made up.

The Gospel of Luke is around 50 pages long. More than 100 people appear in those pages. Most of them were sources of first-hand stories about Jesus. Luke marshaled those eyewitness accounts, says verse 4, **so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.**

Luke was after truth when he wrote this gospel. I'm after truth when I preach this gospel. I hope you are after the truth about Jesus Christ when you read and hear this gospel. Some of the eyewitnesses told Luke their stories at great risk. That's why he has withheld their names. Other eyewitnesses suffered and some died for sticking to their eyewitness testimony about Jesus.

A Celebration

We usually rush right past Luke's eyewitness Christmas accounts in chapter one. We want to get to the juicy parts in chapter 2 about Caesar Augustus, no room in the inn, swaddling clothes, angels, shepherds, and glory to God in the highest. But Luke one and the second half of Luke two help us see the bigger picture. The bigger picture helps us see better the meaning of Jesus.

Two weeks ago, we read the account of Zechariah, a Jewish priest, and his experience in the Jerusalem temple. He and his wife, Elizabeth, **had no children, because Elizabeth was barren: and they were both well along in years.**

Zechariah went to work in the Jerusalem temple at regular intervals. He was standing alone at the altar of incense, and an angel appeared to him. He had one message for Zechariah. **“Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.”**

The angel told Zechariah extraordinary things about the man his son would grow up to be. He may as well have been talking to a brick wall. The old man couldn't get beyond his biology. He said to the angel, **“How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”**

Angels do not like to be trifled with, and that angel said to Zechariah, **“I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you to tell you this good news. 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 proper time.”** John couldn't talk for at least nine months. We pick up the action in Luke 1:57-58. **When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and**

they shared her joy.

And of course everyone wanted to know what they were going to name the boy. Would they name him after his great uncle who had distinguished himself in the village ages ago? Would they name him after his wife's father? Or maybe he would be Zechariah, Jr. So, it came as something of a shock when, according to verse 60, **his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."**

"John? What kind of name is John? We know Zechariah had visions, and Elizabeth at her age got pregnant. But John?" **They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."** They didn't believe her. "She can't be serious. She's not well after the birth. Giving birth at her age is hard. I hear the delivery was long and hard. She's not quite right yet. Let's ask Zechariah."

So they did. Verse 63: **He, still unable to speak, asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." Immediately, his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.**

Time out! Time for a sidebar! **"What then is this child going to be?"** I am asking that question about some of your children. I sense that the hand of God is on some of the young in this congregation, and I wonder in joy and hope how they will serve Christ and His Church some day. Do you see it? Would you moms and dads be willing to release your sons and daughters to serve the risen Christ? In all my years at BVBC I have never been so hopeful about a generation of teenagers as I am about this one. What are they going to be? The Lord's hand is on them. Let's watch together

The Greater Good

When Zechariah could speak again, the eyewitness report said that he praised God. Zechariah's praise fills the rest of the chapter. We would expect his praise to focus on his newborn son. It did not. It focused on the first trimester child Mary carried.

Zechariah called that child by a venerable Old Testament name: **the horn of salvation**, a name given to God in Psalm 18:2. We would just say the Savior. The name and everything Zechariah said expressed a Jewish understanding of the coming Savior. It is to Luke's credit that he did not edit out the Jewish understanding. The larger meaning would come later. Verse 68ff:

**Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come and has redeemed his people.
He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
– here comes the meaning: **salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us –
to show mercy to our father Abraham:
to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.****

Why would Zechariah talk so much about Mary's Son and so little about his own son? Because Mary's Son was the Savior. His son was not. He was giving preference where preference was due. It took nothing away from Zechariah's delight in his newborn son to acknowledge the priority of Jesus.

It takes away nothing of your flourishing as a human being to acknowledge the priority of Jesus. Don't push Christ away. Save yourself from this sinful and adulterous generation. Join yourself to this or another community of Christians, and confess publicly, "Jesus is Lord."

We are living in the last days. That means we live in times when the authority of Jesus to govern the nations is being contested in every way imaginable. If you think Christ and the Church are being attacked from within and from without, you're right. Don't be surprised. Don't be surprised if it gets worse before it gets better. Don't be on the wrong side of this global struggle. Identify yourself with Christ and His Church.

He Must Increase; I Must Decrease

Back to Zechariah. Zechariah of course had good things to say about his son, John. Verse 76:

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High – that was indeed high praise; but in the next breath, Zechariah reverts to the priority of Jesus.

**for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.**

John's subsequent ministry was brilliant. He spoke truth to power. He moved the multitudes to repentance and faith. He became a household word. And when Jesus went public, and people started leaving John to follow Jesus, John's closest followers didn't like it and they told John so.

But John had learned his priorities from his father. Here are John's words as reported in the Gospel of John 3:29-30. **"The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend (that's me) who attends the bridegroom (that's Jesus) waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.**

And the One to whom John gladly deferred did not lord it over His followers. Jesus said of Himself: **"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."**

The call to serving and service defines what it means to imitate Christ the way a fragrance can define the room you are in. We can't get away from it.

Servants of the Most High

Since we can't away from it, what do we do with this high and holy calling to serve? Let me give you five practical steps you can take to do something about it.

A. Serve Christ. Whatever you do to help another human being, do it as an act of service to Jesus. I had the privilege of leading a team to the Gulf Coast to help clean up after Hurricane Katrina. We sat in my office at our first meeting and I asked them why they wanted to do this. Brian Glass was the first to speak. "I want to do this because Jesus said that what we do to help the poor we do for Christ Himself." He set the tone for our trip. We were serving Christ by serving people whose homes were a wreck.

B. Serve the person who needs you. The whole point of Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan is that your neighbor is the person who needs your help. It may be the person next to you at work or the poor family in Jamaica that needs a house.

C. Give help; don't give advice. Sometimes good advice is the help you give. Most of the time advice does not help. Do something for the person.

D. Get outside your comfort zone. The most rewarding help we ever give is helping someone who can never repay us. Finding people like that will take you into uncomfortable situations where you may not know exactly what to do. Go, help Bill Perkins serve tea and coffee to homeless guys at 6:00 in the morning. Prepare a meal for people who are sick and may be dying from AIDS.

E. Do it with someone else. Giving real help is usually a shared effort anyway. Doing together compounds the meaning, the accountability, and the affection. Parents, do you ever serve needy people with your children? They need that more than they need a new X-Box or iPad.

Evangelicals like us have such a lousy reputation in the public square because of our perceived preoccupation with political power. Serving the needy would put a stop to that and dispose people to hear about the Christ we serve. God is at work in your life. If you want to discern better what He is doing, serve the needy. God makes His home among the poor and the poor in spirit.