

Luke 1:5-80

The Certain Gospel: Grace for Doubters

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Have you ever noticed how two people can respond **differently** to the **same news**?

- “Look, free **puppies!**” **Great news for kids. Bad news for parents.**
- “Mom and dad, I got into my **first choice** of college, the expensive private one!” Great news for their child. Bad news for their bank account.
- “The verdict is... not guilty.” Great news for the defendant. Bad news for the plaintiff.

In Luke chapter one, we read **how** two **different** people respond to **similar news**. The news is delivered by the angel **Gabriel** to Zechariah first, and then Mary. Gabriel tells them both that they are each going to have a **child**, and their child either prepares the way for the **Messiah** (Zechariah’s son John) or is the Messiah himself (Mary’s son Jesus). The Messiah is the **deliverer** God promised to his people. This news is **difficult** to believe. Elizabeth, Zechariah’s wife, is old and **barren**, so it’s **nearly impossible** for her to conceive. And Mary is a **virgin** and so it’s **impossible** for her to conceive.

Chances are the angel **Gabriel** has not appeared to you this Christmas and said, “You will bear a child and you should name him John or Jesus.” But we’ve all received **good** news we can celebrate this Christmas—the **birth** of **Jesus Christ**, not to mention all the **promises of God**. There’s **plenty** to celebrate.

I don’t know about you, but **I struggle** to find hope at Christmas time. I feel a little like **Charlie Brown** in [A Charlie Brown Christmas](#). I find it hard to believe, hard to celebrate. I like all the Christmas **lights** and the **snow** (not so much Santa). I like all the **gift** and the wrapping. But I don’t like the **busyness** and **consumerism**. And I often find it **hard** to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

That’s a little bit like the **heart-attitude** of Zechariah. He heard the good news, but like **Charlie Brown**, and like **me**, and maybe like some of **you**, he struggles to believe. I **want** to have hope, and I think we can, but we first need to examine our own hearts, and we can do so by looking at Zechariah’s heart.

Zechariah the doubter (Lk 1:5-25)

Here’s the story: In the time of King Herod (probably around **4 B.C.**) there was a priest named Zechariah who had a wife named Elizabeth (1:5). Both of them were **good people**. It’s not that they did more good than bad, but they sought to **obey God**, his commands and decrees, and so God considered them **righteous** (1:6). But there was only one problem, they were childless. They were both old and Elizabeth was **infertile** (1:7).

One day Zechariah was chosen by **lot** (what looked like **chance** but was **God’s will**) to burn incense in the temple before God (1:8), and when he goes in, the angel **Gabriel** appears to him (1:11, 19). Of course, this was **terrifying**, but the angel assured him he didn’t need to be afraid.

Luke 1:13a, 17 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.

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.” (NIV®)

The angel promises Zechariah that he and Elizabeth will have a child in their **old age** just like God gave **other infertile couples** in the Old Testament children as a **sign** of his **promises**: **Isaac** to **Abraham** and **Sarah** (Gen 21), **Samson** to **Manoah** and his wife (Judges 13), and **Samuel** to his mother **Hannah** (1 Sam 1). This child John will be **special** like them. He will **fulfill** the prophecy from the Old Testament book of **Malachi** that the **prophet Elijah** would come again to prepare the way for the Lord (Mal 3:1, 4:5-6). John is a **miracle baby** and the **second Elijah**. That’s amazing news! But does Zechariah believe?

Luke 1:18 Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.” (NIV®)

Zechariah is saying this to the angel, “**Prove it!** You say I’m going to have a baby. Prove it! I don’t believe you.” Have you ever told a **friend**, or **sibling** or **child** something and they say, “Prove it!” It’s **annoying**, isn’t it? And that’s kind of like how the angel **reacts**.

Luke 1:19-20 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. 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.” (NIV®)

The angel sees Zechariah’s **unbelieving heart**. Zechariah asked for a **sign**, as if an **angel** isn’t enough, so he gives him a sign—**silence**. The angel says Zechariah will be both “silent and not able to speak…” (Lk 1:20). Later Zechariah’s family has to **make signs** to Zechariah to get his attention (Lk 1:62). Zechariah isn’t just **mute**. He’s also **deaf**. He can’t **speak** or **hear**—complete **silence**. He leaves the **temple** that way and the people wonder what happened (1:23). There are **two lessons** for us here.

Doubt can turn into disbelief.

It’s **okay** to **wrestle** with **doubt**, but it’s not okay to lose the **wrestling match**. There’s a **doubt-monster** in all of us—a **hopeless Mr. Hyde** of sorts. He wants to change us from **believers** to **doubters** to **unbelievers**, but we can’t let him **win**. Zechariah had literally just received news he had **waited for** his whole life, but somewhere through the years his doubt **smothered** his hope and joy. When **disbelief** takes hold, we hear God **came into** our **world** as a baby boy, but say… “**prove it.**” We learn God cares enough to **send his Son** to rescue us, but we say… “**so what.**” *Doubt can turn into disbelief.*

The consequence of disbelief is silence.

After a while, doubters can come to **expect silence** from God. And pretty soon, silence is all they **want** to hear too. *Silence is the consequence of disbelief.* **Zechariah** walked out of that temple in silence and unable to speak. That means he couldn’t tell his wife **Elizabeth** the good news with his own **lips** (1:24). So he must have **written** it down, and when she read it, he could only **watch her face**. He couldn’t hear her **laughter** and **joy**. When we don’t believe, we **don’t share**. If we read something on **Facebook** we believe to be true, what do we do? We share it.

- If you **don’t believe** that God can use all things **for our good**, even hard times, then you can’t share that message of hope with those going through **hard times**. Silence.
- If you **don’t believe** that God is making **all things new**, even as we **age** and experience **death** and **tragedy**, then you can’t share the message of **eternal life** with those who need it. Silence.

- If you **don't believe** God is good when he doesn't give you **what you want**, then you can't share that God is good with others who go through **disappointment**. Silence.

Zechariah doesn't believe, but thankfully, someone else believes...

Mary the believer (Lk 1:26-56)

The story continues: God sends Gabriel to Nazareth in Galilee to the **teenage girl** Mary who has made a **binding-promise** to marry Joseph (1:26-27). Gabriel appears to her and says:

Luke 1:28b "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." (NIV®)

Mary, like Zechariah, **is afraid**. It must be **scary** to meet an angel. But Gabriel **assures** her and **says**.

Luke 1:31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 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, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." (NIV®)

Gabriel is delivering the **most amazing news** Mary or any human being has ever received. "Mary, God is going to give you a child who is the Son of God, who is the final descendent of King David, and who will **rule** the whole **universe** forever and ever." But what does she say? She says...

Luke 1:34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" (NIV®)

Zechariah says "**prove it!**" Mary says "**explain it.**" Mary asks "How will this be?" The **key-word** is "**will.**" How "will" this happen? In other words, "**I don't understand** how this is going to happen. Can you **explain** it to me?" But like a **savvy lawyer**, the angel doesn't answer her question. He says the **Holy Spirit** will make it happen, and that her relative Elizabeth has a child too (1:35-36). Before the angel leaves, Mary says she is the Lord's **servant** and **affirms** that God's words will be **fulfilled** (1:38). Her faith shows us **two things**:

Believers hear good news and have faith (despite their circumstances).

Mary hears the good news and believes, and that's what it **means** to be a believer, a Christian. Mary's belief is **not dependent** on her **circumstances**. She's supposed to get married, and she probably knows her soon-to-be husband Joseph may divorce her for her **unwed pregnancy** because it looks like she committed **adultery**. Maybe that's why she **runs away** to stay with Elizabeth. But despite all of this, she believes.

Sometimes it's hard to believe the **good news of Jesus** and the **promises of God**. I grew up with **Jordan**. He married **Arielle** and a couple years later they got pregnant and had baby **boy**. Two months later they got **devastating news**. Arielle had **cancer**, aggressive cancer. They knew that **nowhere in Scripture** does God promise to heal cancer. So **instead** they clung to a list of the **promises of God** found in Scripture. Jordan printed out **this list of the promises of God** and put it in his **wallet**, which I've brought for you today.

Thank you God:

- 1) ...that **you are for me** and not against me! (Romans 8:31)
- 2) ...that you jealously desire **relationship with me**! (Deuteronomy 5:9)
- 3) ...that you just want to be **with me**! (John 17:24)
- 4) ...that **I am no longer a slave to sin**, but a son and daughter in your eyes! (Galatians 4:7)

- 5) ...that because of what you did, **I have confidence (and joy)** to draw near your presence! (Hebrews 4:14)
- 6) ...that **you have given me everything I need** for life and godliness! (2 Peter 1:3)
- 7) ...that you don't call me a servant, **but a friend**! (John 15:15)
- 8) ...that you don't put fear on me, but **have given me love, power and self-discipline**! (2 Timothy 1:7)
- 9) ...that I can consider myself dead to sin, and **alive in you**! (Romans 6:11)

Whether you're going through **infertility**, or **joblessness**, **cancer**, a hard **relationship**, or are struggling with **depression**, these are the promises of God you can **hold onto**. Take home this sheet and put it in your wallet or on your bathroom mirror, and when **hopeless Mr. Hyde** threatens your joy, hold onto them. *Believers hear good news and have faith (despite their circumstances)*. This **leads us** into **worship**.

The reward of belief is hopeful praise.

Clinging to God's promises allowed **Jordan** and **Arielle** to praise God in the treatment and to continue to praise God as she is **disease free**. But those promises will also help them praise God even if it returns. **When** Mary goes to visit her relative Elizabeth, she sings a **song** of praise—**The Magnificat**. It starts like this.

Luke 1:46b-49

"My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name. (NIV®)

Mary is singing a song of praise and thanksgiving for **God's deliverance** like **Moses** and **Miriam** did when God delivered his people from **Egypt** (Ex 15:1-21), like what **Deborah** sang when God delivered the Israelites from the **Canaanites** (Judges 5:1-31), or like what the infertile **Hannah** sang when God gave her baby **Samuel** (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Tonight, **like** Mary and Moses and Miriam and Deborah, and Hannah, we also have a chance to sing a song of praise because **our deliverer** came in a **manger**.

We always sing a **worship song after** the **sermon** because it gives us an opportunity to praise God for the things we've learned and how he's spoken to us. If **life is good** right now and you're **enjoying Christmas** and **worshipping Jesus**, would you sing just a little bit louder to help those of us who are struggling. And **if you're struggling**, would you sing even if you don't feel like it. Sing not because you feel good, but because Jesus is born. Sometimes it's the **act** of praising God that changes our hearts.

God offers grace to doubters. (Lk 1:57-80)

The story doesn't **end** in silence for Zechariah. Elizabeth gives birth. She tries to name her child **John**, but her relatives pressure her to name him something else (1:57-61). Zechariah motions for a writing tablet and writes **four words of faith**, "His name is John." Do you know what **John means**? John means "**Yahweh is gracious**." Yahweh is God's name and he is **full of grace** towards **us who need it**. God opens Zechariah's mouth and he sings a **song** of praise just like Mary (1:67-80).

Over **9 months**, God has changed Zechariah's heart. He **drains** the **hard-heartedness**, the **bitterness** from years of **disappointment**, and the **unbelief**, and he **fills** his heart back up with **joy**, and **hope**, and **faith**. Maybe you've experienced **weeks**, **months**, or **years** of **disappointment**. You're completely **drained**. God can **fill** you back up with **hope** and **joy** and **praise**, not because he gives you what you want, but because he gives you **himself** through the Christ-child Jesus. Jesus came, lived a **sinless** perfect life, and died a terrible tragic death as a sacrifice for you and for me. None of us have **enough faith**. We're all **guilty** of **doubt** and **disbelief**, but because of Jesus, God declares us "**not guilty**." So what's my **big idea**? What's the point?

God offers grace to doubters, hope to believers, and Jesus to all.

Charlie Brown is depressed and down in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. He feels this way despite all the **traditions** and due to the **consumerism**. Linus says to him, "Of all the Charlie Browns in the world, you're the **Charlie Browniest**." He tries several things to make himself feel better, but none of them work. The **chaos** builds and builds and finally in **desperation** Charlie Brown asks, "**Does** anybody know what Christmas is all **about**?" And with that, **Linus** walks center stage and reads **Luke chapter 2**.

“8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not; for, behold, I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

12 And this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying

14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and goodwill towards men."

"That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown." *God offers grace to doubters, hope to believers, and Jesus to all.*

Pastor Jonathan Romig wrote and preached this message for the people of Cornerstone Congregational Church. [Click here to listen to more sermons](#) or [click here to read our story](#).