

LIVING

on the

PLAIN

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Mike Stone



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God-Lovers

Read Luke 1:1–4

Luke's beginning targets both his audience and purpose, and thereby offers a target for our own journey, both through the book and into faith. Tradition identifies Luke as the physician who shared time with Paul on a missionary journey, as described in the Acts of the Apostles, the second of Luke's writings. If so, Luke was not an eyewitness to the events he describes and has collected sayings and stories of Jesus, likely using Mark's Gospel as an outline and another yet-to-be-discovered document that the evangelist Matthew also seemed to have used (commonly known as "Q").

Luke organized each story or saying as a brushstroke in his portrait of who Jesus is and what he means. There is an Eastern tradition that locates Luke as the first iconographer and that Luke's representations of the saints and Jesus himself are not only traditional, but historically accurate. Understanding Luke as an iconographer is a helpful approach as we begin our study, as icons are not prayed to, but prayed through. Their gaze is meant to help the viewer search themselves and search out the grace of God through the saint depicted: in this case, Jesus. In writing his account for Theophilus, Luke acknowledges the stories about Jesus have already been presented by many.

Theophilus may have been a friend or acquaintance of Luke, but was more likely a general address. “Theophilus” is a Greek compound that is best translated “God-lover.” Luke writes an account of Jesus’s life and ministry and what it might mean for the future of humanity to these God-lovers. In reading this book, consider yourself in part of Luke’s audience. Not sure if you love God enough? No worries. God-lover may mean something like “curious enough to do some sniffing-out after.” As a college student, I heard about the ministry of a particular Ivy League chaplain who was frequently confronted by brazen students confronting his piety with the challenge, “I don’t believe in God.” The wise chaplain, so the story goes, took a deep breath and asked with palpable curiosity and patient follow-through, “Tell me what kind of God you don’t believe in; I probably don’t believe in that one either.” Perhaps God-lover doesn’t mean contemporary Christian consumer, cloistered monastic, or denominationally branded, confessed, confirmed, and communicated Christian. Perhaps it describes folks who wonder about life, love, justice, and peace, and what they have to do with humanity and things greater than ourselves. In this sense, Luke does not write to a single person, to pious people, or a church, but to all. Luke writes to give his account of Jesus to people who wonder, precisely because there were so many other versions of the story that Luke believed did not meet the needs of God-lovers or of God.

What will *our* Lukan journey be about? Could it be bearing witness in a culture saturated with often competing and incoherent stories about who Jesus was and who he would become and how he would act in today’s world? It’s almost as if Luke is inviting us to pen our own gospel to the world through how we live our lives. There are competing and incoherent stories about the Lord in the many Gospel accounts, both authorized and those accounts found outside the New Testament canon. How will we bear witness to the truth?

Does God delight in compassion or judgment? What do we delight in? Does God help those who help themselves? Do we help the helpless? Does God forgive begrudgingly or with fanfare and celebration? Does God hate the same people we do? Luke invites us to live the answers to these questions more deeply than we ever have before for the “God-lover”

inside each of us. Luke offers another opportunity to live into our theology of grace so that our family, friends, and neighbors can experience the truth about Jesus that they already know all too well in story, but may have yet to experience in life. Luke frames a chance to air our own curiosities, hopes, doubts, and confusions about what the gospel means for the twenty-first century: its challenges, doubt, and losses. God-lover, God-doubter, God-curious, God-disappointed, let us “Luke” at Jesus together and live on the plain of faith more deeply.



Unexpected Messengers

Read Luke 1:5–25

This reading offers many seemingly unrelated insights that comically (in the Shakespearean sense) weave together. Perhaps Luke is offering us insights into the tapestries of our own lives.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are blameless and righteous, but barren. They do not deserve to have their hopes disappointed, nor to be disgraced by their community, as Elizabeth summarizes. Rather, these should be ideal folk, looked up to not only for their lineage, but their fidelity and piety. A cultural expectation gets in the way of people appreciating who they are. Perhaps it gets in the way of their appreciating themselves. They could just as well have a child with mental illness or one who grows up and ends up incarcerated or loses their job with no severance, and so on. It is often easy to conclude that something is inherently wrong with people who do not meet cultural norms. Zechariah and Elizabeth defy our “get-what-you-pay-for” stereotyping. As we begin our reexamination of Luke, Jesus, and faith, can we wonder how people carry their burdens instead of condemning the burdens they carry?

Zechariah is a priest who has trouble hearing and believing God. There is hope for us! Priests, then as now, are no better or more pious than anyone else, but simply feel called to perform a particular role in community life and enough people recognize and consent to their call.

Angels might be costumed or in disguise today. Angel means “messenger” in Greek—like a singing telegram, a network newscaster, or a barista at Starbucks. This messenger happens to be Gabriel, who stands in God’s presence, but Zechariah does not seem to know that. Did angels have wings or halos? In art they do, so we can visually distinguish them from the saints and other characters. In the Hebrew Bible, superhuman beings seems to come in three types: giants; the seraphim, winged serpents perpetually ablaze; and cherubim, four-faced (lion, ox, eagle, human), eyeball-covered beings with three sets of wings. (Maybe that’s why they always start their messages with “Do not be afraid.”) What if angel messengers looked just like us? What if they actually *were* us? Maybe Zechariah sees Gabriel as a mortal because Gabriel is one, an arch-messenger, one who offers God’s thoughts to others. After all, aren’t the prophets also just messengers? Wasn’t Martin Luther King Jr. a messenger from God in so many ways? This is not to say that there are not supernatural beings in God’s household, but that maybe angels are simply messengers from God. What message would God have us deliver on a spiritual journey to the barren and ridiculed? Could we be angels? Would we be believable?

Zechariah is wordless after hearing the news he had always yearned for but had increasingly lost hope in. Maybe he was being chastened or maybe he was just speechless at grace. When was the last time you were speechless at grace, filled with awe and wonder, knocked down by the love of another not because you felt unworthy, but because the weight of their love took your breath away? “I don’t know what to say” is, after all, a message. One of my best friends insists that it takes at least ten seconds of silence to absorb a compliment. Could we discipline ourselves to be speechless when presented with grace in any form?

Will the son Zechariah and Elizabeth always wanted also be the one they hoped for? Children are not commodities. Their son, John, does not grow up to be a venerated priest, but a guy standing on a city corner wearing a sandwich board that reads, “The end is near.” He grows up to be intentionally homeless and wears a hair shirt inside out. He eats weird food. He challenges political leaders and loses his head. The narrative is blank, but I sure hope that Zechariah and Elizabeth were proud of their

boy. Can we make room for God's surprises to come in packages that confront our norms and the scripts we have imagined for even years on end?

Maybe all of these threads are just trying to make the supernatural more accessible, offering us opportunities to be speechless at everyday grace, to wonder when confronted by disappointment, to make room for empathy, and to grow into appreciation for one another. I hope so.



Grace without Strings

Read Luke 1:26–38

As a child I always wondered why it took God so long to come up with the idea of Jesus. More specifically, I had been duly instructed that without Jesus to take away our sins, we were going to hell. What did that mean for all the people who were born, sinned, and died before the coming of Jesus? What about the prophets, patriarchs, and matriarchs? Was their best only good enough to get them on the flannel board of the Sunday school room and not into God's rest?

Compassionate Sunday school teachers and pastors got me off the hook here: those people's sins somehow got pushed forward onto Jesus, who took care of the past and the present. But did they live believing they had to work their way into God's favor, missing out on an understanding of God's grace? Some believe we all have ended up in this same plight; unless we do the work of accepting Jesus, we don't get to have the grace that comes with belief. I remember learning that God is especially mad at people who hear about Jesus and reject grace by not accepting him as their personal Lord and Savior through the sinner's prayer. God gives a gift and we have to accept it. It's not work, I was taught; it is like taking the keys to a new Ferrari (hardly work to reach out and receive something so valuable without paying for it), only hell is on the line if you don't accept it.

I give gifts like that. I have nuggets of wisdom, strategy, and training programs to burn fat and build muscle, whether literal or figurative, that sure would make people's lives better. If they don't want to take what I am giving, then they don't deserve them. I help people I don't know sometimes, with money or gift cards, but I make them know that it is important how they use my gifts of grace, because if they don't really need charity, they have no business receiving it.

Surely God does not give as we do. Surely gifts are given to be enjoyed or neglected, invested in or left fallow, displayed or enjoyed, not because of what we will or will not do with them, but out of the intention behind them. Strings are attached to investments, rentals, leases, and loans. Gifts really are the property of the recipient, even if unopened or underappreciated. I am trying to grow into being a giver instead of an investor or landlord, and Luke can help me.

In Luke's story, Mary gets quite an opportunity: join the unwed teenage mothers' club. This is not a story about God's gracious gifts, but about God's call to a ministry of grace. God's grace was assured for Mary no matter what she said. God's grace in the person of Jesus came through Mary precisely because she chose to work with God, even at her own expense, to suffer a scandal she didn't earn or deserve on behalf of the very people who would likely deride, ridicule, and mock her. Maybe the reason so much time passed between the expulsion from Eden and birth of the Lord is that all the other women God approached had said no. Maybe Mary was just the first one to say, "Yes."

Maybe discipleship is more about saying "Yes" to God than "No" to sugar. "Maybe," as Jack Johnson sings, "pretty much always means no." Martin Luther had his own phrase: "How often 'not now' becomes never." If God's grace is assured, might we be willing to say "Yes" to God's latest seemingly cockamamie scheme for revealing grace and life for the world? Maybe our "yes," our participation with God in grace distribution, isn't really about whether or not we are given grace, but whether or not we choose to open the gift and enjoy it. If a messenger from God, whether Gabriel, your crazy Uncle Steve, or your annoying coworker stands before you and asks if you will join God's conspiracy to help the world be open to the grace God freely offers, could your Lukan discipline be to answer, "Yes"?



The Model Mary

Read Luke 1:39–45

John the Baptist and his mother, Elizabeth, model empathy. As a child, I learned that empathy and sympathy are synonyms, but having experienced and offered each, I am confident that they are worlds apart.

Elizabeth (and John, still in the womb) rejoice with Mary. For a teenage girl, unmarried, pregnant, and possibly “visiting” her cousin in order to escape stoning in her home village, safety must have been paramount. Elizabeth and Zechariah not only offer sanctuary in their home, but the opportunity to experience the potential that there may be more than grief and panic; there may also be feelings of hopefulness, blessedness, and connection with her body. They do not try and talk Mary out of her feelings, but within a safe space, offer to help realize feelings that she was not even aware of. We are not always in positions of offering physical sanctuary, but we are confronted with uncountable daily opportunities to offer empathy as sanctuary instead of the sympathy we so often settle for.

Sym-pathy: Feeling like someone else. Usually ends up being competitive. Can lead to “conversational narcissism” where we try to connect with someone else’s experience by offering our own as proof that we have real street cred in the school of hard knocks. When someone is hurting, sympathy talks over them so that they know they are not alone. Sympathy often tries to talk people out of the intensity of their feeling by comparing

it to our own. “I know your parents are driving you crazy, but at least you still have your parents; mine died when I was ten.” *At least* often appears in the sympathy script and is usually the harbinger of a backhanded sign of support, like beginning a sentence with “I love her to death, but . . .” Sympathy follows this bull into the china shops of grief and loss and actually ends up begging for the one in need of care to offer it. Sympathy sees someone at the bottom of a dark hole—afraid, possibly hurt, and unable to see well—and discusses other holes. Sympathy is about feeling like someone else, which is pretty hard to do, even for identical twins, because, well, there are just so many variables in our experience. We can never prove that our surviving cancer presages everyone else doing so, that our moving past the death of our spouse of fifty-three years means everyone will have the same outcome.

Em-pathy. Feeling with. Connects with human base more than the exact details. All of us are equipped to empathize because we have all experienced loss, pain, betrayal, celebration. Getting in tune with our experience allows us to imagine and connect with someone else’s, even if the particulars vary wildly. Empathy seeks to understand, not to compare. Empathy seeks to make room for the story and experience of another above all else. Empathy says, often without words, that I am here with you, able to make space for your grief and loss and joy—for you—in my own, different life. Empathy validates the feelings that we have that we are rarely in control of. Empathy asks: Tell me more. Starts with, “I have no idea how you might be feeling.” Middles at, “I want to be with you right now.” And ends when the other person tells us they are done, not when we are done. Empathy is when we see another at the bottom of a hole, tie a rope around our waist so that we do not fall irretrievably into the same hole (where’s the help in that?), and join them.

Elizabeth’s end line seems the crux of faith—to trust that God will fulfill our lives. The hardest thing for me in relationships is knowing whether or not my love or effort is going to “work.” Will it make a difference? I could withstand tutoring bills, daily commutes, endless picking-up-after, homework, medicine reminders, or on and on if I knew that we were going to get where I knew we needed to go. Maybe Elizabeth

is offering us an image as we begin this journey through Luke; we are invited to trust that in the end, God *is* going to catch and hold us no matter how unsteady we feel or are. What if we could live our lives backward, certain that God will catch us? If only we could be certain that our efforts regarding our spouses, children, parents, coworkers, and others *are* going to carry these folks into larger life, that God is able to accomplish more than we can ask or imagine. Maybe the fall into grace could be something that we enjoy instead of something that makes us hyperventilate. Maybe that fall could open us to empathy and grace, knowing that God's outcome is assured. Maybe peeking ahead spoils the ending. But maybe the ending enriches the way we live our own story.