

How to Prepare for Christmas

Series: Encountering Jesus (though the Gospel of Luke)

Brad Bailey - December 2, 2018

Malachi 4:1, 5-6

"Surely the day is coming...⁵ "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ⁶ He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."

Luke 1:1-4

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 Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me 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.

Luke:1-5-7

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 upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

Luke 1:8-13a

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.

Luke 1:13b-17

Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name 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 from birth. 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 fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Luke 1:18-23

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 answered, "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 proper 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.

Luke 1:24-25

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."

What truths can prepare us to celebrate this Christmas season?

1. Christmas is about what is _____.
2. Christmas is not what _____ tells us is important... it about what humanity actually needs.
3. Christmas is best received by the _____ that precedes the coming... including solitude and silence.

How to Prepare for Christmas

Series: Encountering Jesus (through the Gospel of Luke)

Brad Bailey - December 2, 2018

Intro...

I have always found energy and excitement in sharing God's Word ...but I'm especially excited today... because we are launching **into multiple new seasons**...which I will explain more in a bit.

One of the seasons we start today is **the Christmas season**: It's as if a **public address system announcement** that we are now free to go into the hustle and bustle of the holidays... **holiday shopping** and **holiday travel** and **holiday movies**. And before I could too cliché or grinch-like... I love the season. But I find I miss what is most profound. I sense that it's easier to enjoy the sentiment... but harder to take in the substance...easier to enjoy the warmth than the depth. The deepest experience of Christmas lies in a quietness... quieter reflection...a waiting... anticipation.

I felt a sense of this, when this past Monday, as many may have seen...was a remarkable moment in our ventures to Mars.

The InSight Mission was the **first interplanetary launch from the West coast**... and was launched from nearby... **Vandenberg Air Force Base** on May 5 (2018).

It was the **first attempt to get a robotic arm and equipment** that can explore the inner nature of the planet.

Remarkable... **traveled for 6 months... 300 MILLION miles...**

Over half of all ventures to mars do not make it. The nearly impossible element is getting the small craft to land in a thin atmosphere that begins with it hurling over

12,300 mph... it's heat shield is reaching 2700' F...and they must try and create ways to slow it down to **5 mph** before its three legs touch down on Martian soil.

In this process...all communication stops...and this creates what is called the...

"7 minutes of terror"

As most of you know... the Insight landed successfully on Mar.

Amazing...

But today we stand before that which transcends the mere venture within space and time... for we prepare to consider the infinite God... beyond space and time...entering our world.

Contact from the creator...outside the dimension of time and space... I will send one... a savior of the people... a king above all earthly kingdoms. He would take away the consequences of sin... on him would the punishment fall...but he would be raised up.

And the prophet Malachi wrote...

Malachi 4:1, 5-6

"Surely the day is coming..."⁵ "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes."⁶ He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their

children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."

God would come ... and **would send a prophet like the prophet Elijah** ...to prepare God's people. And **those are the last words ever recorded by the prophets.**

Silence began....and it continued... year after year...for 400 years.

Like those 7 minutes of terror... the people were left staring... listening... **if the silence was not broken... it's all dead.** But it was not seven minutes of terror...but **400 years of terror...of not knowing** if there was any connection with the creator... of waiting in silence to hear God speak.

That is why the season leading to the celebration of Christmas has been called the **Advent season.**

The word "**Advent**" is derived from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning "**coming,**" it is a **season of preparing to receive.** [2] **Advent...helps us prepare for Christmas** by connecting with the reality of waiting... of silence.

And this is where the Gospels become the announcement that breaks the 400 years of terror...the moment the fulfilment comes. And today we are going to launch into...**Gospel of Luke.**

Today... launching ourselves into the Gospel of Luke.

We have chosen to **title this long venture... Encountering Jesus** through the Gospel of Luke...because **at the center** we are **encountering Jesus.**

- **Excited to begin a long journey focused on Jesus**
- **Excited that we will have small groups starting in January that will be engaging this encounter... in a unique way.**

So today... Let me offer a short intro to this Gospel...and then hear how God begins to pierce the silence.

The word "**Gospel**" simply means the **Good News...** more accurately the **Great News... Breaking News..** and was **used to speak of the message of salvation...** but **by the second century** it was **also used in reference to the accounts themselves...**and **the four which** were recognized as **having apostolic authority...**that is... drawn from firsthand accounts.

These four being written by Matthew, a disciple who was a tax collector; John, the "Beloved Disciple" mentioned in the Fourth Gospel; Mark, the secretary of the disciple Peter; and Luke, the traveling companion of Paul.

SO let me begin with an introduction of the Gospel of Luke. Luke begins...

Luke 1:1-4

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 Therefore, since I myself have **carefully investigated everything** from the beginning, it seemed good also to me 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.**

The Gospel of Luke

- **The author is Luke, who was a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul.**
- **Luke also wrote about the spread of the Gospel and the acts of the Apostles that followed...known as the “Book of Acts.”**
- **Luke was a doctor ... distinct in discovery and detail (research, eyewitnesses, etc.)**

Draws upon Mark's Gospel...but explored and expanded from direct resources. Luke has not written because others have failed to do so, but because other accounts have not included things which he feels are essential.

- **50% of Luke's accounts are beyond that which are included in the other Gospels....and includes a wider scope, more historical & chronological details, more names** (for example, Luke mentions thirteen women not found in the other gospels), **and more parables.** (nineteen of 51 are unique to this gospel)
- **Luke's Gospel uniquely includes more personal information about the thoughts and feelings of the people involved.** Luke, for example, informs us that “Mary treasured these things in her heart,” ([Luke 2:51](#); cf. 1:29).
- **Luke is writing as an educated Gentile to another educated individual who is willing to pursue the truth (“most excellent Theophilus”) and all who would value careful investigation of the truth.** Theophilus appears to refer to a high-ranking Roman official or an influential leader in the city of Antioch.) [3]

Luke is be a truth -seeker to truth-seeker

Luke is **neither simply a Jewish follower** of Jesus trying to prove what he had already known...**nor is he a Jewish convert** trying to help other Jews who affirm what they share culturally as a people. He's more of sincere seeker of truth who became a companion to Paul... some believing they may have been students at the University of Tarsus... and he is now convinced and committed.

As I noted...his scope is **wider than others**... as he described, he “**carefully investigated everything from the beginning**”...and as such he begins with what **precedes the birth of Christ**...what leads to it.

Naturally when we think of Christmas...we think of the birth of Christ... that it all starts there.

But the coming of a child begins with anticipation...preparation.

If you’ve ever had a child or known anyone who did... you realize the unique season that precedes it. A season of anticipation and preparation.

Luke provides us with that season.

It’s what we could call the “Christmas Prequel.” Over the next few weeks we get some backstory.

As God had spoken through Malachi hundreds of years before... first God would raise up a prophet to prepare the way for His coming salvation.

Luke introduces us to a couple who had been waiting... amidst a people who had been waiting.... So let’s briefly engage the story...and then I conclude with a few keys that I believe will prepare us for this season.

Luke:1-5-7

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 upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

He begins with an **important contrast**... “**In the time of King Herod**”...the one who **all recognized was ruling things**... the one who **bore the authority of the Roman Empire**... during his time lived a priest and his wife who no one would have noticed.

In contrast...there was a couple living at that time... **Zechariah and Elizabeth were waiting for a promise that they might never see.**

They were **obscure**... and likely **seen as having no favor with God.**

It is true that Zechariah **was a priest**... but not of the high priestly family...but rather simply of the tribe of priests. At this time in Israel’s history...this didn’t represent **anything very prominent**. There were an estimated 7,000 to 20,000 who were of the priestly tribe.

They were **not from the priestly centers** of Jerusalem or Jericho...but from the backwoods of Judea. [4]

Perhaps **more notably**...**they were without children**. There was a **tremendous stigma** attached to being without children, one which the woman probably felt most keenly. It may well have

been thought that their predicament was the “**judgment of God,**” for some sin they had committed (cf. John 9:2). [5]

So far as Judaism was concerned, Zacharias and Elizabeth were obscure and insignificant people.

BUT...God’s view of what really matters is very different. We may try to find importance in our political powers and popular icons...but God views importance quite differently.

Luke explains that “**Both of them were upright in the sight of God**”

They were **not perfect** but they were **set apart from their peers** in the way in which they walked with God.

Luke 1:8-13a

*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.***

Zechariah was an **ordinary country priest**...and because there were so many...they were divided into groups which only served at the Temple twice a year for a week...and their assignments were decided by drawing lots... for a week at a time, twice a year. Only one would enter the holy place. Because there were so many priests, they were only allowed to burn the incense once in their lives, and still some never got the chance to do it. For a priest to receive the honor of burning the incense was the **greatest day of his whole life.**

In the midst of the moment of having entered the Holy Place...

“Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him...”

The **role of such messengers** from God... is **rather fascinating.** [6]

Such a reference to an angelic messenger is something that some might suggest is merely a part of what was common **days of old.** They might say: “This is just part of pre-scientific superstitious belief.”

But in fact... encounters with angelic beings was **less a part of common belief** and claims back then that it is now. To the Hebrews, God was always ruling but rarely did such a messenger serve to communicate...only when announcing something of cosmic activity that someone was to receive. In contrast, today... nearly 8 in 10 Americans believe in angels...and nearly half

claim to having a personal experience with a guardian angel. **So the Bible actually reflects an angelic visitations as more limited.**

And whenever there is an account of someone being engaged by God in the presence of such a being...the **response is one of great fear.** Verse 12...

When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

What is being brought is good news.. *".. the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; **your prayer has been heard.***

It's been natural to assume that the prayer being referred to was a prayer to have a child. But many suggest that such a prayer had likely stopped long ago. Zechariah seems to **perceive it is way too late** for he and Elizabeth to have a child. The prayer that likely remained in their lives...was the prayer for God to send the prophet God said would prepare for the Messiah. And that is what the angel announces.

Goes on to speak of his unique identity...

Luke 1:13b-17

*Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name 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 from birth.** 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 fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.**"*

His name will be John...name means "YHWH has been gracious".

And he would not merely be a delight to them...but many will rejoice because of his birth. Why? Because he is the one who will be set apart...and bring many people back the Lord... in the spirit of Elijah... specifically fulfilling the words of God's promise through Malachi.

What is he hearing?

He is hearing that **the long-awaited hope is being fulfilled.** The very prophesy that had been spoken over 400 years earlier...by the last prophet recorded in the Old Testament Scriptures was being fulfilled.

And this prophet... whom Israel has waited for centuries... would be his son.

Imagine how hard it would be to comprehend that. Your life is as ordinary and routine as any... and an angelic messenger tells you that the creator of the universe has chosen to begin his climatic announcement through one you will bear and raise.

Having a child was joyous...but this late in their life...it would only have been a limited consolation for the years of being childless...**BUT** this is about something so much bigger.

Christmas is always about **something bigger....about being drawn into something so much bigger than we can comprehend.**

Whatever your circumstances may be this season...remember this couple...and remember there is something bigger at hand.

Luke continues...

Luke 1:18-20

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 answered, "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 proper time."*

It may seem a little surprising...but **he wants some sign** in order to believe this.

He says, "I'm old." And, **he says very tactfully**, "And my wife is...well along in years." Now there is a man who has some experience! He's old, but she's just "advanced in years."

He asked for a sign...and he got one... he was going to be unable to speak until the child was born.

Perhaps a punishment ...a consequence for his lack of belief... but in some ways it may have also been a sign... **a sign to be quiet and wait...** to prepare yourself.

Luke 1:21-23

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.*

Imagine... people waiting outside the temple... wondering... returning home... husband quiet.

Luke 1:24-25

*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.**"*

This final statement of our text today...is a beautiful one...

He has come to show his favor... to take away her disgrace...and those words would echo through her to all the people. For all who had be deemed accursed...were receiving God's favor.

God had brought life where there was none. A strange thing happens when God starts to draw near. When Jesus shows up, life begins to stir in the most impossible places. From barren wombs to occupied tombs, life springs up where you would least expect it.

We can imagine all the years she had been barren...all the shame...and how she could finally start hitting the streets... head to the mall...and show off her great news. But... it says...

She "remained in seclusion.

Here we find a man in silence...a woman in seclusion.

Christ began with space to reflect... to prepare one's heart.

CLOSING:

SO how might we prepare to enter this Christmas season? Let me close with a few brief truths which I believe God would speak to us today to shape this season.

What truths can prepare us to celebrate this Christmas season?

1. *Christmas is about what is true.*

Remember who Luke is...and what he did. He "carefully investigated everything from the beginning.. so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."

Luke 1:3-4

"I have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."

The skeptic... legitimate skeptic... he went after the facts. **False skeptic is just **playing a game**. Luke is willing to pursue the truth.**

God has intersected and intruded into [if we can use that language] human history, and therefore there is truth, there are facts, there are events, there are concrete things that have happened that form the basis of what God is doing in His plan of salvation.

He is not interested in what is just a story, but a true story.

Luke wanted **nothing to do** with **fairy tales**... he **wanted facts**.

I think the first thing many of us need to do is confront is the whole way in which this thing called “Christmas” has been shaped. What was once a season of reflecting upon the profound nature of what it represented...of God entering life...and the humility... the hope. ...was overlaid.

What created a St. Nicolas... was formed into a Santa Clause... safer...more commercial.. Soon... it all becomes blurred into something more sentimental than serious. Our culture has needed this to become a nice story...but less associated with actual truth... more like a fairy tale... best played out with small children.

“You know, it doesn't matter what you believe; what matters is doing good things.”

2. Christmas is not what popular culture tells us is important... it about what humanity actually needs.

The front page of the Jerusalem News would not have had any idea that the creator of universe was coming among them...and that the prophet to prepare the way was now conceived. If we want to prepare for Christmas... we will have to decide who defines what is really important. We may have to give a little less weight to the mass of political and popular news cycles... if we want to take in the truly great news of God.

We live in a land of diversity. Different cultures have different holidays ...and I believe our culture reminds us that they should all be respected. In response to such a cultural position...I would say...amen... I have been called to live in this world without presuming personal superiority...without using force... and can engage whatever my neighbor may believe. But I would also pause ...and not join my culture in believing that diversity is the greatest hope we have...the ultimate end in itself.

I will pause and consider Luke... a Gentile writing to another Gentile...both outside the Jewish culture...and telling how God used a couple who appeared outside the world of important...to remind us that Christmas is for everyone. The One who comes...is coming for all.

3. Christmas is best received by the waiting that precedes the coming... including solitude and silence.

Waiting is the exact opposite of our modern society's view of Christmas. Society views Christmas as a time of rush and busyness. We make Christmas about shopping, spending and doing as much as possible. But the true nature of Christmas.... comes with waiting... a waiting that has to recognize the need...and wait upon the work of God.

As we seek to embrace the season of Advent, we should do so with a willingness to be patient. We should embrace a willingness to wait. We should have a spirit of anticipation because the best things that God desires to do are yet to come. We should be eager because God is far from being done with His work.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were waiting for a promise that they might never see.

The spirit of waiting and hoping is at the heart of Advent. Advent is a time of longing. Advent is the celebration of the first coming of Jesus and an anticipation of the second coming.

Advent is also a reminder of our separation from God because of sin. Jesus came near to us because we had drifted far from God. Jesus came to earth to bring us back into the right relationship we had been created to experience. Zechariah and Elizabeth waited in the midst of the silence of God.

Christmas is best received by the waiting that precedes the coming... including space for the solitude in which we long with hope...and the silence in which we listen.

PRAYER and CLOSING WORSHIP

"Come Thou Long Expected Jesus". -<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAGE1Es8IPs>

Resources: Some elements drawn from John Hamby "How Can I Be Sure?" Series; Matt Chandler; Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III "Gospel Beginnings"

Notes:

1. Some sources of info and video about the Insight mission:

Send off with explanation - <https://www.theverge.com/2018/11/26/18112781/nasa-insight-mars-lander-landing-success-supersonic-parachute>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csV0BCWZ0oA>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=40&v=mo6HnBZ7N-Q

Curiosity (2012) -<https://www.jpl.nasa.gov/video/details.php?id=1090>

2. For a good background on the development of an "Advent" season in the Christian church, see WHAT IS ADVENT? By JUSTIN HOLCOMB

<https://www.christianity.com/christian-life/christmas/what-is-advent.html>

3. It has long been a general consensus that Luke was a Gentile. However, it should be noted that some believe that this has been too accepted by mere tradition and note reasons he may have been a Hellenized (Greek cultural) Jew. See: <https://www.levitt.com/essays/luke>

As for the identity of "Theophilus"... there are many views and most agree it is not that which can be given a definitive answer. The term is "Hebrew" and means "friend of God"...and some

speculate a high priest by that name who had been open to Jesus...but others believe he was a Gentile... perhaps a local official...perhaps with an educated affinity or past classmate of Paul... as reflected in Luke's focus on Gentile cultural elements. Still others consider that it may have been a generic term referring to all followers of Christ. However that is unlikely given it is described as a specific individual ("most excellent") and such hidden meaning has no precedent in the New Testament. Further articles on this can be found at:

<http://preachersstudyblog.com/2011/10/who-is-theophilus/>

<http://globalchristiancenter.com/christian-living/lesser-known-bible-people/31472-most-excellent-theophilus>

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Theophilus-Luke-Acts.html>

4. To appreciate how people looked upon those from the hill country of Judea, one may recall Nathaniel's response upon learning that Jesus was from Nazareth: "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" ([John 1:46](#)).

5. It is vital to understand that the correlations we make between circumstances in our lives and God's intent...can be painfully wrong. As one describes, "Often when we are dealing with a crisis, or a sickness in our own life, it is not because God is punishing us. No, there are many other possible reasons for such things. Remember the man born blind in John 9? There too, the disciples thought that this man had sinned, or that his parents had sinned, so that he was punished by God with blindness. But Jesus said that neither this man nor his parents sinned, but he was born blind so that God could be glorified. This was the same reason that Elizabeth was barren – so that God could be glorified.

6. The following provide resources for current beliefs in angels:

Are Angels Real? By [Benjamin Radford, Live Science Contributor](#) | March 29, 2018 -

<https://www.livescience.com/26071-are-angels-real.html>

A 2007 Baylor Religion Survey found that 57 percent of Catholics, 81 percent of black Protestants, 66 percent of Evangelical Protestants, and 10 percent of Jews reported having a personal experience with a guardian angel. And 20 percent of those who identified themselves as having no religion also claimed having encountered an angel.

And in Time magazine article re the Baylor study

<http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1842179,00.html>, they note:

"In a poll of 1700 respondents, 55% answered affirmatively to the statement, "I was protected from harm by a guardian angel."

Poll: Nearly 8 in 10 Americans believe in angels *December 23, 2011, 8:25 AM*

The AP-GfK Poll was conducted Dec. 8-12 and is based on interviews with 1,000 adults nationally. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 4 percentage points.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/poll-nearly-8-in-10-americans-believe-in-angels/>

See also: Do Angels Really Exist? Peter S. Williams - <https://www.bethinking.org/christian-beliefs/do-angels-really-exist>