


Advent 2023

NOT SO SILENT A NIGHT





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Introduction

From the beginning, God has been speaking.

In the Garden of Eden, God spoke to our first representative, Adam, guiding and guarding Him with His words. But as time marched ahead, Adam took the path of sin, spurning God's words as untrustworthy and bringing humanity with him into ruin.

God, however, continued to speak, raising up regular people to proclaim His character, promises, and plan, telling of a time when He would speak by His very Son.

That appointed time came on an otherwise ordinary night in the city of David, Bethlehem. Heaven broke open the silence of this common night as an angel loudly announced what we all desperately need, what he called "good news of great joy": God's salvation, spoken of for so long by so many, had arrived in the person of Jesus.

This was no silent night.

Important Info

About Luke

This Gospel is named after its author, who also wrote the book of Acts as a companion to his Gospel.

Luke accompanied the Apostle Paul on some missionary journeys and was a physician (see Acts 11:28, 16:10-17; Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11).

The style of Luke's writing indicates that he was also a careful historian, likely conducting interviews with eyewitnesses and authoritative sources so that he could provide an accurate and thorough account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the spread of the gospel across the ancient world.

God works in ways we don't expect

Throughout his Gospel, Luke shows how God works contrary to popular expectations. For example, God chose Mary - a poor, unwed and common teenager - to be the one to give birth to the Messiah Jesus. And Jesus isn't born in a royal setting; his first bed is a feeding trough.

Study Resources

Courses on Luke (online)

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/luke/>

Study Bible (NET Bible - online)

<https://netbible.org/bible/Luke+1>

Recommended Reading

The Birth of Christ by J.V. Fesko

Hidden Christmas by Timothy Keller

Luke 1:5-20

MAIN POINT

For 400 years between the prophet Malachi and the events of Luke, God didn't say a word through any prophets. Now God once again speaks, bringing His redemptive plan to its apex in Jesus. But first, His people need to be prepared.

As in times past, God chooses to work through a barren woman to bring a Spirit-filled messenger (John the Baptist), whose job, in continuity with the Old Testament prophets, is to get God's people ready for "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

GROUP INTRO

Let's be honest: the biblical story and events of Christmas can sometimes feel all too familiar, and therefore, boring. How can we help each other be in awe of God during this time?

TEXT

1. Read Luke 1:1-4. Why does Luke say he's writing? What sticks out to you from these verses?

Leader help: Luke wants to provide his reader - Theophilus - an accurate historical account about the gospel so that he and other Christians can have certainty about Jesus. Remember that Luke wrote both this Gospel and the book of Acts as a two-part account.

Notice that the Christian faith is not about taking a "leap in the dark" - Christianity is based on verifiable, historical facts about Jesus. Luke provides all kinds of historical details to help his reader(s) trust the messages from their pastors.

Notice also that Luke mentions "ministers of the word" - an indicator that Christianity has had a formal, Scripture-focused structure since the beginning and that it's always been based on the apostolic faith that was "once for all delivered" (See Jude 1:3) by Jesus's appointed leaders.

2. There are details in verses 5-20 that connect the New Testament to the Old Testament. What connecting details do you see in verses 5-20?

Leader help: Below are some of those details.

- A. *Elizabeth is barren and God worked through barren women at key points in redemptive history (see Gen. 18, Gen. 25, Judg. 13, 1 Sam. 1-2).*
- B. *"Commandments and statutes" is a reference to the law of Moses (see Exodus 20), which Jesus fulfills by living in perfect obedience to and taking our death penalty for our failure to live in obedience to.*
- C. *Zechariah is a priest whose son, John, will be the last old covenant prophet before the arrival of the Messiah. The priesthood always pointed forward to the ministry of Jesus, who stands between God and man as both God and man.*
- D. *Zechariah and Elizabeth are said to be righteous before God and blameless - this doesn't mean they didn't sin, but that they lived by faith in God. Being declared righteous in God's sight by faith alone is something we see early in the biblical story (see Genesis 15:6).*

3. What unique role does John the Baptist play in God's plan? Can you think of other figures in Scripture who served God in similar ways?

Leader help: God had not sent any prophets to His people in over 400 years, since the prophet Malachi. Malachi 4:5-6 contains a promise that before the day when God would start bringing His plan to fulfillment in Jesus (called "the day of the Lord" in Malachi), He would send a prophet like Elijah. That prophet is John. John's role is to provide the final warning to Israel: they must repent and get ready to become who God has made them to be because the Messiah is about to arrive. John will also bring a renewed harmony to families, and fathers, who are called by God to lead their families to Him, will once again lead in a way that honors God.

As we now know, a good portion of Israel goes out to see and hear John, but a good portion also rejects Jesus and therefore brings judgment upon themselves. But throughout Luke, Gentile sinners, tax collectors, and spiritual outcasts receive and trust Jesus.

4. Where in this passage do we catch glimpses of God's grace?

Leader help: The first message from God in Luke, delivered through the angel, is "Do not be afraid", followed by assurance that God has heard Zechariah's prayer and has come to bless him and his wife. This isn't a reward for their righteousness, but a demonstration of God's care for suffering sinners. Zechariah and Elizabeth may have been seen as being under God's judgment since they had no children.

God also promises joy and gladness, stating that their miraculously-born son would be empowered by the Holy Spirit to prepare God's people.

None of this is earned or deserved - it's simply demonstrations of God's faithfulness to His promises.

APPLICATION

1. John the Baptist's role was to prepare God's people for the arrival of Jesus. We, too, have a part in helping one another prepare - this time, for the second coming of Jesus. So how do we do this? What's it look like to live as people who are prepared for the return of Jesus?

Leader help: How we live prepared is by trusting Jesus, day in and day out (see Romans 1:16-17 and John 15:4-5). What it actually looks like to live prepared could be summarized as love for God and others. Passages such as Romans 12:1-2, 9-21 and Ephesians 4:17-32 gives tons of examples of what this daily life looks like. So we live by faith, and that faith is shown in our thoughts, words, and actions.

2. Some churches or theological “tribes” provoke more fear than hope when they talk about the return of Jesus. But Scripture says His return is something we should want (see 2 Timothy 4:8). What do you most look forward to about the return of Jesus? Why?
3. Take a moment to examine your own mindset and life. Do you truly believe that God has plans for your joy and gladness? Why or why not? What gets in the way of trusting God is actually for you?

Leader help: It may be helpful to include a discussion about God's goodness from a passage like Romans 8:31-32.

PRAYER

Luke says that the good news of Jesus is for all peoples. With this in mind, we'll be praying **global** and **local** throughout Advent.

Global: Pray for Omar, a Bible smuggler in the Middle East, asking God to give him discernment as he seeks to share the gospel while driving his cab.

Passage to guide your prayers: Colossians 4:3

Local: Pray for single dads and moms. Ask God to strengthen and encourage them.

Passage to guide your prayers: 2 Corinthians 1:8-9

Luke 1:26-38

MAIN POINT

Who does God work through? Upending expectations (as is common in Luke), an angel shows up to a humble, unimpressive teenage girl to announce that she will bear the long-awaited King of kings, God's own Son. All of God's communication across history has been pointing ultimately to His Son, who will be born to a willing Mary.

GROUP INTRO

In this week's passage, God acts entirely on His own to bring huge blessings to the undeserving. When in your life has God done something similar? How did this impact your relationship with Him?

TEXT

1. What historical details do you notice in verses 26-38? How might these details have benefitted Luke's readers then and how do they benefit us today?

Leader help: We're given a timeline (six month), specific location (a city called Nazareth, which wasn't a well-respected city), several descriptions of Mary's reaction, indicating that she was just as shocked as the reader might be, Mary's relationship status (betrothed and a virgin), the name of the angel, and prophetic promises about Jesus. These details indicate that the facts were and are verifiable. What stands in the way of faith in Jesus is not a lack of accurate information, but a hardened heart that resists God. Therefore, despite the shock of the situation and how crazy it may sound, we can be sure that the eternal God became a human baby and was conceived in the womb of a virgin teenager.

2. How does Gabriel's declaration about Jesus's identity and role emphasize the centrality of Jesus in God's plan?

Leader help: Jesus is the Son of the Most High/Son of God, He is holy, and He will be the eternal King. His role as king will be to reign forever, without end. This belongs to no one else. Therefore, Jesus is the ultimate authority; what He says, goes. He is also unbeatable and unstoppable, for His reign will never stop. He is both divine and human, forever. No one can ever topple Him or undo His work. So if we trust Jesus, we're secure forever.

3. What about Mary does Luke emphasize in these verses?

Leader help: Luke's main emphasis is Mary's willing, trusting humility. She does nothing to warrant or deserve God's grace, she simply receives it. She hasn't asked for this massive change in her life, but she submits to God out of trust anyways. She's a passive recipient of God's work and promises.

4. God is the active agent in this passage. What does God do here and what does this reveal about Him?

Leader help: He sends His messenger Gabriel, He will conceive Jesus, He is present with those who humbly trust Him, and He dispenses grace whenever and to whomever He wants. This reveals that God is omnipresent (present everywhere), omniscient (He knows all things, including events that haven't occurred yet), gracious (He does for us what we cannot do for ourselves, and blesses us even though we don't deserve it), active and involved in history, and completely faithful - He will always fulfill His promises.

APPLICATION

1. Jesus is the center of God's plans. So what specific steps can we take to keep Him at the center of our plans - our thoughts, decisions, and actions on a daily basis?
2. How can we, like Mary, actively seek God's will in our lives while trusting in His promises?

3. It's no secret that, for some of us, this time of year is painful. How can recognizing God's sovereignty and overarching plan impact our perspective on our pain? What about our perspective could change if we remember who God is and what He's doing?

PRAYER

Luke says that the good news of Jesus is for all peoples. With this in mind, we'll be praying **global** and **local** throughout Advent.

Global: Pray for the 200 Christians who have fled from a city in Pakistan due to persecution, asking God to meet their needs for clean water, food, and shelter.

Passage to guide your prayers: Psalm 31:1-2

Local: Pray for those experiencing the foster care system, asking God to reveal Himself to them as a true Father and caregiver in their isolation and fear and to protect them from further harm.

Passage to guide your prayers: Psalm 68:5

Luke 1:39-56

MAIN POINT

The first of four songs in Luke's birth narratives celebrates the covenant mercy of God and how He turns the world on its head. The world has a path of exaltation that mirrors the devil's: proud striving and selfishly fighting for a throne. But God's path of exaltation is humility and sacrifice, embodied (literally) in Jesus's life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

GROUP INTRO

In your opinion, what's the best Christmas song? Worst? Why?

TEXT

1. The first 10 times that Luke uses the word "Lord" are all clear references to Yahweh, Israel's God. What, then is the significance of what Luke records in verses 41-43?

Leader help: Theologian Benjamin Gladd puts it like this: "When Elizabeth confesses that the unborn Jesus is her 'Lord,' Luke has thoughtfully and carefully identified Jesus as Israel's Lord incarnate...This baby is the eternal Lord and God of Israel."¹ Jesus is the true God in the flesh. Mysteriously, He is the one who, for example, led Israel out of slavery in Egypt (see Jude 1:5).

¹ *From the Manger to the Throne: A Theology of Luke* by Benjamin L. Gladd, page 42.

2. What characteristics and actions of God are celebrated in verses 46-55?

Leader help: Characteristics: God is attentive and personal, merciful, holy, powerful, faithful, and revealing (i.e. God is not silent but has spoken His promises in the past and ensured they've been preserved in His Word for us today).

Actions: God actively and personally cares for those who humbly trust Him, God conquers and brings down the proud humans who look untouchable to us, and God faithfully fulfills His covenant promises to save sinners, a salvation that is entirely centered on Jesus.

3. Verse 52 - "God has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate" - highlights a theme that's present throughout Luke. Read Luke 14:7-11 and Luke 18:9-14. What is Luke telling us about God and the way God works in this world?

Leader help: God chooses to reveal His grace, power, and glory to and through the lowly, humble, and broken. His holy justice is revealed in His condemnation of those who believed that their righteousness, power, wealth, or status could gain His favor. It's only through faith alone in Jesus alone that we can expect to experience exaltation rather than humiliating condemnation.

4. How do we know that the grace and mercy that Mary highlights in her song wasn't just for her but is for us as well?

Leader help: When Mary mentions Israel and Abraham's offspring, we must remember what Paul says in Galatians 3:7-9 - we become a part of Israel/become "children of Abraham" through faith in Jesus. When we trust Jesus, who is the true and ultimate Israel, we receive God's blessings because we're united to His obedient Son.

APPLICATION

1. How does Mary's song challenge cultural norms and expectations about exaltation/becoming great?
2. When did you last experience and display pride? What was the result of you speaking or acting in pride?
3. Describe the last time Jesus and His work in your life made you pray to or praise God like Mary does in this passage. How can we help one another live in this kind of grateful praise?

PRAYER

Luke says that the good news of Jesus is for all peoples. With this in mind, we'll be praying **global** and **local** throughout Advent.

Global: Pray for Najma, an Egyptian Christian who was tortured by Muslims for her faith. Ask God to strengthen her trust in Him and heal her mind and body.

Passage to guide your prayers: Psalm 6:2-3

Local: Pray for those who have experienced the death of a loved one in the last year. Ask God to comfort them and surround them with attentive community.

Passage to guide your prayers: 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Luke 2:1-21

MAIN POINT

What does God “say” through His Son? What is the message that God will not be silent about? We could summarize it in three short words: “I save sinners.” Jesus, whose name means “God saves” has arrived as the final Word of God, and it is an announcement of grace. We can, therefore, look all of God’s promises in the Face (of Jesus) and trust, surrender, and refuse to stay silent about His announcement of salvation.

GROUP INTRO

Nowhere does the Bible command us to celebrate Christmas or the birth of Jesus. But what are some benefits you’ve experienced from celebrating the arrival of Jesus?

TEXT

1. God sovereignly oversees governments and world events for His own purposes. Read Luke 2:1-6 then read Micah 5:2. What all does God oversee in order to have the promise in Micah fulfilled?

Leader help: God oversaw the establishment of the Roman government, then the appointment of Caesar Augustus, then Augustus's desire to have citizens register. He then oversaw Joseph and Mary's journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem - all while Mary was pregnant. And before all of this, He saw to it that Joseph's lineage came from David, so that he would have to take Mary and the unborn Jesus to Bethlehem.

2. How does Luke 2:1-7 reveal the humility of Jesus?

Leader help: Jesus embraces the complete human experience by truly becoming a human being; in these verses, the eternal Lord has added humanity to His deity. He will be entirely dependent upon people whom He created. He will experience what it is to live as a man in a broken world. And He isn't born to fame and acclaim; He's born in a borrowed feeding trough away from His own home.

3. Shepherding was not the most socially acceptable occupation in Jesus's time. What, then, is the significance of the glory of the Lord shining upon shepherds in a field?

Leader help: Throughout the Old Testament the glory of the Lord - a visible, bright manifestation of God's presence - showed up in significant moments like the covenant at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 24:16-17) and the establishment of the temple (2 Chr. 5:7). But here, God is again reversing expectations and showing up to lowly shepherds rather than the spiritually elite. These shepherds will be the first ambassadors of Jesus.

4. Why is the birth of Jesus called "good news of great joy that will be for all the people"?

Leader help: Luke makes it obvious that Jesus is the long-awaited Messianic King, and under His rule, anyone who trusts Him from anywhere in the world - no matter their background, status, or family - will be forgiven, redeemed, and made new. Furthermore, there's coming a day when Jesus will come again, not as a baby, but as a conquering King, and He will get rid of all evil and suffering.

APPLICATION

1. Who in your life needs to hear the "good news of great joy" and what stands in the way of them hearing it from you?

2. What aspect of Jesus's birth causes you to be in awe of God?
3. If someone were to ask you why Jesus is called "Savior" in this passage, what would you say? What is it that we need to be saved from?

Leader help: A good passage for discussion is 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10.

PRAYER

Luke says that the good news of Jesus is for all peoples. With this in mind, we'll be praying **global** and **local** throughout Advent.

Global: Pray for the churches around the world who are under threat. One specific congregation in Indonesia, led by pastor Fadhlan, needs prayer for a place to meet for worship.

Passage to guide your prayers: Acts 4:29-30

Local: Pray for God to save specific unbelievers in your life.

Passage to guide your prayers: 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

A New Year's Meditation

Read Matthew 11:25-30.

Jesus Himself embodied the humility He calls us to, extending an invitation to any sinner - no matter how depraved - to humble themselves and experience His rest.

As you approach 2024, what heavy burdens do you need to give to Jesus?

Where in your life do you need to really, truly trust that all things - literally all things - are in Jesus's hands?

What stands in the way of you living out 2024 with the deep assurance that Jesus truly is, in His very being, "gentle and lowly in heart"?

Where do you most need to experience the humble, kind, merciful gentleness of Jesus? Who in your church can you discuss this with?

PRAYER

Praise Jesus for who He is and ask Him to help you live in humble trust, under His gentle Lordship, throughout 2024.