

With the story of John the Baptist's birth, Luke reveals how the God of Israel is a God who acts in both expected and unexpected ways. Luke portrays the expected, yet unexpected, nature of God's actions at the very outset of his Gospel with the story of John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5–25), and he continues this theme with his account of John's birth (1:57–66) and Zechariah's subsequent song (1:67–80). By beginning his Gospel in this manner, Luke prepares the way for the story of Jesus' birth and reminds his hearers that the advent of the Messiah also brings a series of surprises.

According to Luke, Jesus is the promised, long-awaited Messiah, yet he does not always act in ways that adhere to our expectations. Instead, Jesus is a messiah who turns our notions of what it means to be "saved" upside down and who compels us to be open to the new ways in which God may be acting in our lives.

Zechariah and Elizabeth

Luke first signals the expected, yet unexpected, nature of God's actions with his account of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah and Elizabeth are "righteous before God," Luke tells us, "but they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years" (Luke 1:6–7). During Zechariah's routine service in the Jerusalem temple, however, the angel Gabriel appears to him and announces that Elizabeth will bear a child, whose name will be John (1:11–13). As Zechariah's response to Gabriel demonstrates, this is surprising news indeed, for he says, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years" (1:18).

Despite their advanced days, Elizabeth and Zechariah are to have a child. And despite the fact that God is acting in response to Zechariah's prayer—presumably, for a child (1:13)—Zechariah does not seem to be expecting this news. Instead, he poses an objection, and to be fair, his objection seems to make sense: couples do not usually have children when they are old and have a history of infertility.

At the same time, Gabriel's news that an elderly couple will miraculously bear a child is not altogether unexpected, for it recalls the similar story of Abraham and Sarah. Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, Abraham and Sarah also receive surprising news that they will

bear a son in their old age (Genesis 18:1–15), a birth that establishes a pattern throughout the Old Testament of God opening wombs for the sake of fulfilling divine promises (for example, Genesis 25:21; 29:31–30:24; Judges 13:2–25; 1 Samuel 1:1–2:10; 2 Kings 4:8–37).

With Luke’s account of Zechariah and Elizabeth’s impending parenthood, therefore, we find God continuing to intervene in the lives of God’s people for the purposes of salvation history, in this case through a hoped-for, yet still surprising, pregnancy. By continuing this biblical pattern of God “blessing the barren,” Luke indicates that we can expect God to be faithful to God’s people and true to God’s promises—promises that Zechariah himself recollects when he sings of God’s oath to Abraham (Luke 1:72–73). God’s promises may be fulfilled in ways we do not expect, but through the birth of an unexpected child, God “has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors and has remembered his holy covenant” (1:72).

John the Baptist

Like his parents, John the Baptist also points to how God’s promises in Scripture are fulfilled in unexpected ways. On the one hand, John fulfills the prophet Isaiah’s words about the one who will “prepare the way of the LORD” (Isaiah 40:3), or the one who will usher in God’s restoration of Israel. Gabriel speaks of this restoration when he says that John will “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17), and Zechariah confirms that John will “go before the Lord to prepare his ways” (1:76). When John grows up, his ministry of baptizing and his proclamation of repentance bring these words to fruition, and Luke reminds us of this by quoting these verses from Isaiah in full (Luke 3:4–6; see also Isaiah 40:3–5).

On the other hand, however, John’s fulfillment of Isaiah moves the prophet’s words in a new direction because of the identity of the one called “Lord.” As the narrative progresses, we learn that Gabriel’s reference to “the Lord” does not just refer to God but to Jesus, since “the Lord” (*ho kyrios*) is one of Luke’s favorite christological titles (a title that Elizabeth first proclaims to Mary in 1:43: “And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?”). The “way” that John prepares, therefore, is not just for God but for Jesus, whose identity as *kyrios* inextricably links him to God’s own

self. With this shockingly high Christology, Luke insists that Jesus, though born of the virgin Mary, is also inseparably bound to the God of Israel.

Jesus

Finally, Jesus himself, like his predecessor John, also exemplifies how God's promises are fulfilled in surprising ways. Although we see this tension unfolding throughout the entirety of Luke's Gospel, Zechariah especially sounds this theme in his prophetic, Spirit-inspired song (Luke 1:67–79). At the beginning of the song, Zechariah first underscores how Jesus is the promised Messiah. "The Lord God of Israel," Zechariah sings, "has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old" (1:68–70). Just as the prophets foretold, Zechariah assures us that Jesus is the anticipated Messiah, or the "righteous Branch" of David, of whom Jeremiah spoke (Jeremiah 33:15).

But as Zechariah continues to sing of this "mighty savior," his words start to take on an ironic tone, especially for those of us who know the rest of Luke's story. Zechariah says that God's act of raising up this savior will rescue the Jewish people from the hands of their enemies (1:71, 74), but this rescue occurs later in Luke by Jesus falling into enemy hands, namely the hands of the Romans. Zechariah also says that this savior, or "the dawn from on high," "will give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (1:78–79), yet Jesus ultimately provides that light by undergoing death himself.

As Luke's Gospel reveals, Jesus is not a messiah who conquers Israel's enemies through war and violence. Jesus is instead a messiah who conquers violence itself through his death and resurrection; he is the one who "guide[s] our feet into the way of peace" (1:79). For Luke, this is "the Lord." This is the Messiah who embodies God's faithfulness to God's people and who can be expected to act in unexpected ways.

God of grace, thank you for this season of waiting.

Thank you for the beauty of the sleeping earth waiting for spring's new life.

Thank you for the joy of children waiting for the excitement of gift giving.

Thank you for the gift of familiar carols, whose joyful music touches waiting hearts.

Thank you for the far-flung family and friends that we can't wait to see this season.

Thank you for the gift of Jesus Christ; we have been waiting for a Savior.

We pray for all who are waiting this morning;

people who are waiting for an end to violence because they have known too much war;

people who are waiting for healing because they live with sickness and pain;

people who are waiting for good news because they are weighed down with sorrow.

We pray for all of the earth that is waiting--

creatures who are waiting for protection because their environment has been destroyed;

waterways that are waiting for renewal because they have been contaminated;

lands that are waiting to be redeemed from pollution because we have forgotten that

God called the land good.

Throughout the world, in and on and under it, waiting happens, waiting grows and gathers, the earth is waiting for redemption.

In eager expectation we wait for the revelation of the Son of God.

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!

So God imparts to human hearts, the blessings of his heaven,

no ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,

where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Lord enters in."

Amen