

Four Little Words

Sermon-Based Study Guide
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Luke 1.1-25 | December 3, 2017

Prepared by Rev. Curtis A. Bronzan
curtis@gspc.org | 562/493.2553 x115

I. Introduction to this Study

This Sunday we begin a series in the Gospel of Luke engaging the Four Little Words of Advent: Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. In this study we will engage hope through the story of an elderly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth.

II. Connecting with One Another

The poet Dante wrote in *Divine Comedy – The Inferno*, “Without hope, human beings live only on desire.” What do you think of this quote? How important is it to have hope?

III. Study the Text

- a. We begin engaging Luke’s Gospel this Advent, but will continue to do so into the New Year and all the way to Easter! So, let’s start at the beginning – read Luke 1.1-4.

These first four verses employ classic rhetorical style, “with striking similarities to prefaces found in medical writers and historians of the time.”¹ In essence, Luke is explaining why he wrote his own gospel, despite many already existing. He writes to “Theophilus” (whose name means “lover of God”), who may be a particular person that funded Luke’s research or could be a sort of stand-in name for the church. Luke describes his book as an “account” – a historical term – instead of “gospel” which would be a more theological description.

What do you notice in this opening section of Luke’s “account”? Reread these verses slowly, if it helps.

- b. Between the writing of Malachi (at the end of the Hebrew Scriptures) and the birth of Christ were the so-called “four hundred silent years.” While a great deal had occurred in the world, we don’t have specific record of God’s activity in our Bibles. Have you ever waited a long time for something to happen? How did you feel as you waited? Did you have hope?

- c. Read Luke 1.5-7.

After Luke describes Zechariah and Elizabeth’s priestly heritage and righteousness, he inserts a conjunction at the outset of verse 7. What does your translation say? Why do you think it’s there?

¹ Craddock, Fred B. *Interpretation: Luke*. Louisville; John Knox, 1990, 15.

Is it difficult for you to connect verses 5-6 to 7? In other words, is it difficult to think that people who “observe all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly,” who willingly serve God, should experience such difficulty?

- d. It’s been written that “In 1:36... Elizabeth’s barrenness is a matter of public comment. The impact of this is considerably greater than it would be in our modern society. In the biblical world, a woman’s position in her husband’s family was never secure until she bore a son. Only then did she have a ‘blood’ relationship that secured her place.”²

There are circumstances in our culture – and church – that have similar effects, that receive “public comment.” Which ones have you noticed?

How much hope do you think Zechariah and Elizabeth had? Why?

- e. Luke is the only gospel writer who includes this story of John’s birth. Even as a Gentile, he is passionate about connecting the dots between the story of the Israelites and the church. Think, for instance, about the others who experienced difficult conceiving: Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 17.15-18.15, 21.1-7), Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 25.19-22), Jacob and Rachel (Gen. 30.22-24), Manoah and his wife (Judges 13), and Elkanah and Hannah (1st Samuel 1). Time permitting, read and reflect upon these similar instances of God’s provision.

Justo L. González calls this a typology: “God acts in certain patterns which resemble each other, and which point to their final fulfillment in Jesus Christ.”³ He writes, “in the history of Israel we repeatedly find the theme of a barren woman who conceives thanks to divine intervention, and whose child becomes a central figure in that history. In this Gospel, John does not appear suddenly... he is the continuation of a long history which includes Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samson, and Samuel.”⁴

What “typologies” of God’s faithfulness have you seen in others – or experienced yourself? How could that bring you hope in times of hopelessness?

- f. Read Luke 1.8-10.

Zechariah is chosen for a great honor: To take incense into the holy place and put it on the altar, a representation of the prayers of God’s people rising up to heaven. Recall that God’s assembled people were still in those “400 silent years.” What do you think they were praying for?

The things we pray for often reveal what we value most. If that’s true, what do you most value?

- g. Read Luke 1.11-13.

Recall the description of Zechariah and Elizabeth in verse 7: What do you think they prayed for? Was it only a prayer for a child (not that that’s a bad thing!) – or do you think they prayed for something else?

- h. Fred Craddock writes, “God works in and through the normal avenues of life in the believing community. Luke will show us later that he knows that those ways can and

² Malina, Bruce J. *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2003, 225.

³ González, Justo L. *The Story Luke Tells: Luke’s Unique Witness to the Gospel*. Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2015, 17.

⁴ *Ibid*, 16.

do become distorted and corrupted, but here he lays out a fundamental conviction: continuity with Israel's institutions, rituals, and faith puts one in position to be used for God's purpose. The old (in this case, an old couple) will usher in the new."⁵

Our culture moves at a breakneck pace, valuing the young over the elderly and new over the old. How does Craddock's insight above bring you hope in the future?

What is your role in bringing that future about?

i. Read Luke 1.14-17.

Note the similarity of John's calling with Samson's in Judges 13 (another typology!). How will their child be a blessing to Zechariah and Elizabeth? How will he be a blessing to the whole world? What will be his primary role?

j. God blessed Zechariah and Elizabeth with a child – not because they were earned him (they were righteous before they were pregnant!), but because God is good. While we don't always get the things we pray for, we can be thankful for God's many gifts.

Do you think their child was primarily a gift for them or for the world? When you think of God's blessings in your life, do you see them as being just for you or as a means of blessing others?

What do you have that you could share that would bring hope this Christmas season?

k. Read Luke 1.18-25.

Zechariah's response in verse 18 seems reasonable enough, but it is taken as distrust and he is rendered mute. In what ways do you respond to God's promises like Zechariah?

l. Notice the various ways of heralding God's message in these verses: First, the angel Gabriel comes from heaven to announce the news, then Zechariah makes signs to the assembled worshippers, and finally, Elizabeth declares the goodness of God. How – and to whom – could you be a herald of hope this Christmas season?

IV. Pray

- a. Reflect for a few moments on the things you often pray for, then ask God to direct your prayers to those things which bring you good, bring His church maturity, and bring Him glory,
- b. Lift up those you know who don't have hope – for whatever reason – and ask that God would equip you with the attitude and actions to pour it into their lives,
- c. Pray for our upcoming choir concert and special Christmas gatherings, that God would be honored in our worship and draw us closer to Him.

⁵ Craddock, Fred B. *Interpretation: Luke*. Louisville; John Knox, 1990, 26.