

Luke 1 – Zechariah and Elizabeth

For you, most excellent Theophilus, I have compiled this report. So begins Luke's account of Jesus' life. Luke is thought to be one of Paul's missionary partners. He was apparently also a physician. His account is based on research and eyewitness accounts, but he does not appear to have known Jesus personally.

We don't know who Theophilus is. Some think he was a patron who paid Luke to write the account. Others say it might have been a stand in name for a group of people.

The name means lover of God – theos, God, philo, love. Philo is the love we feel for good friends. So it could be translated friend of God.

But here's what's cool – we may not know who Theophilus was in the first century, but now? Now it's you, friends of God. As we begin this exploration of Luke's gospel, it's my hope that you can hear Luke's account as something written to you. I hope you hear something in the story that you hadn't heard before, and that we can all find new ways to imagine ourselves in the story. And I hope we can continue to bring the story forward into the 21st century.

Like all the gospels, Luke lays out what it means to be a disciple of Jesus – a friend of Jesus. Together through this year, we'll explore ways to practice discipleship. Christianity has too often become only a belief system – and a transactional one at that. What Jesus taught was a way of life.

I love theology, but Jesus never taught systematic theology to his disciples. He called them friends and taught them he could be trusted.

In parables and stories and actions he showed them life in the kingdom of God.

They learned alongside him how to share the good news of the kingdom of God in words and actions. That same invitation to discipleship is open to us.

In the time of silence, I asked you to join Zechariah in the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was the innermost sanctuary in the Temple. There was an altar there. Before Jerusalem was destroyed by Babylon centuries before this scene, the Ark of the Covenant would have been there.

Only the priests could enter the Holy of Holies. The different sections of priests, all descended from Moses' brother Aaron, served their terms in service there.

Altars are central to virtually all religions. Altars represent gateways between people and their God. When Jacob left his home after his betrayal of Esau, he fell asleep in the wilderness with a rock for a pillow. He had a dream of angels ascending and descending on a ladder.

When he awoke he was overcome with awe: Surely God is in this place, and I was not aware of it.”¹⁷ He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”

Jacob then took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as an altar.

Jacob built an altar in a place that the Celts would have called a thin place.

The nature religions...the druids in the Celtic lands and the indigenous people here in this country had altars in the natural world. Sacred trees or sacred mountains. Cairns built of stones. Places where heaven and earth were close...the gods seemed close.

The early Christian church worshipped in homes and probably didn't have much in the way of an altar, but when churches were built, they had simple tables where the elements of communion were served. Altars got much more elaborate as time went on.

Altars are a gateway to God. In many ancient religions, sacrifices were offered on the altar. Such was the case with Israel.

In the Christian church though, altars represent something different. They are still a place where heaven and earth meet...a place where God and humans meet.

There are symbols on altars that draw our eyes toward God. But instead of offering our sacrifices to God, we receive the sacrament of Christ's body and blood and we hear the word.

The direction changed. Just as he came to earth as a baby, Jesus comes to us through the sacrament of the altar.

In response, we offer our prayers and praise before the altar.

This scene with Zechariah and the angel Gabriel is the first movement of a major turning point in God's story. Worship and sacrifice in the Temple had been more or less the way this story describes for centuries. Since the giving of the law at Sinai.

This scene happens at a time of barrenness. Elizabeth is reportedly barren. But it is also a barren, desolate time for the whole of Israel. Occupied by foreign nations for 400 years, they are under the thumb of the Roman Empire and their oppressive taxes and emperor worship.

In the midst of that barrenness an angel appears. And when angels appear, you know something big is going to happen. Gabriel is not there to herald the coming birth of the Messiah yet. Instead, he announces the birth of the one who will go before the Messiah to prepare the way.

This scene is a bridge from the old to the new. Next week we'll read that the angel appeared to Mary. But this story sets us up to anticipate something new.

After millennia of offering sacrifice to God as incense rising to heaven, God will come down, as a baby. And for Christians, the meaning of the altar will shift.

Zechariah didn't expect anything out of the ordinary that day. But before that altar, everything changed, for him, for Elizabeth, for Israel, and ultimately for the world. In the midst of an everyday ritual that people viewed as sacred, but probably had become pretty used to, God showed up in a way nobody expected. Altars are like that.

We come here and receive Jesus. We hear the word. We offer back our prayers and praise. And maybe most of the time, nothing that spectacular happens that we can see. But Christ meets us here at the altar, whether we always feel it or not.

We are used to altars in churches. But if we believe the whole world is God's sacred creation, an altar can be anywhere. It can be in a forest or by a river or in a rocky desert. It can be in your home. Because honestly, there is nowhere on earth that God doesn't show up. In some ways all of earth is an altar.

God promises to be with us no matter where we are and an altar is not necessary. But the ritual of coming before an altar marks a sacred space to make us more aware of God's presence.

Rituals are important in the life of disciples. Jesus and his disciples practiced all the Jewish rituals and holidays. Christians now have their own rituals. Our rituals are important.

I lead worship at Liberty House in Wahoo once a month and communion is part of that. Liberty House is a low income assisted living place. Some of the people who live there have experienced homelessness and many have had serious mental health issues. Serving communion to others is always one of the most holy experiences for me, but there it is especially so. The need for God's love is palpable there. And the sense that God shows up is very real.

If you don't already have some sort of home prayer ritual, I would encourage you to get into the practice of that. A home altar isn't needed, but a special sacred space marked by something can be very helpful. A picture of my little altar is on the insert. Your altar doesn't have to be elaborate. It can be a tree in your yard, or a candle, a cross you hold ...or a rock.

Here and at home, rituals can become rote. We may sort of feel like we're just going through the motions. Who knows how many times Zechariah had performed this ritual before this happened. But every now and then, God does show up in really surprising ways, and when that happens, watch out. Something big might be on the way.