

The Voice (Part 3)

Luke 1:5-25

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Well I invite you to turn with me again this morning to Luke's gospel. Luke chapter 1. For those of you who may be visiting with us, the last couple of Sundays we've been studying together Luke chapter 1 and, specifically, the annunciation to Zacharias of the birth of the forerunner, the messenger, who would announce the Messiah.

On Tuesday, of course, we will have the privilege of gathering with our family and friends to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. Jesús Christos. *Christ* is a title. It's used some 500 times in the New Testament to refer to Jesus. It's a title that simply means the Anointed One, the promised Messiah of the Old Testament Scriptures. Years ago, I came across a Jewish rabbi's response to Jesus' claims to be their Messiah. Rabbi Simmons wrote these words: "Saying that God assumes human form makes God small, diminishing both His unity and His divinity. Judaism says that the Messiah will be born of human parents and possess normal physical attributes like other people. He will not be a demigod. He will not possess supernatural qualities. In fact, an individual is alive in every generation with the capacity to step into the role of the Messiah."

Is that true? **Is it** true that in every age, in every era in our time as well, **there** is someone qualified **to** be the Messiah? That's not the testimony of Scripture. In fact, when you survey both the evidence of the Old Testament and the evidence of the New Testament, it's clear that there would only be one, one-of-a-kind Messiah, and that is exactly what Jesus claimed for Himself. In fact, the gospels He authorized began with the announcement that He is the Christos, the Messiah.

The New Testament then begins to unfold **a** series of evidences to prove that reality. And the very first, clear evidence that Jesus was, in fact, officially the Messiah was His announcement by the legitimate messenger that the Hebrew Scriptures had promised. Malachi, the last Old Testament book, had promised that Messiah would come, but before He came, He would send a messenger who would prepare His way. That's what makes it interesting that while all four

gospels don't include the physical birth of Jesus Christ, they all include John the Baptist, because John is at the heart of Jesus' credentials as Messiah. In fact, in light of that, the Christmas story really begins with the announcement of the birth of John. And so, for the last two Sundays we have been studying Luke 1.

Now let me just remind you of what we've seen so far as we've walked our way through this wonderful story. It is unfolded in several remarkable movements. We saw, first of all, the historical setting. The beginning of verse 5 says it "happened in the days of Herod", that is, Herod the Great, who died in the year 4 BC, who was king of Judea, which is where these events unfold, in that little land bridge that is Israel.

Secondly, we saw a godly priest. Let's look at those verses together. Verse 5:

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years.

The third movement that we uncovered together in this wonderful story was what we called a unique privilege. Notice verse 8:

Now it happened that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the [time] of the incense offering.

That day, during one of his two weeks of annual service at the temple, Zacharias was chosen to enter the Holy Place and to offer incense on the Golden Altar of Incense in front of the curtain before the Holy of Holies. It was a privilege he had never enjoyed in his more than 30 years as a

priest. It was truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. You see, that incense, when it was ignited with the coals from the altar and the smoke began to rise, it pictured the prayers of God's people ascending to Him, entering into His presence.

Now while Zacharias, on that very special day was in the temple, he met, fourthly, an angelic messenger; an angelic messenger. Verse 11:

And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him.

As I noted for you last week, it'd been 500 years since an angel had appeared; 400 years since God had spoken. But on that special, unique day in the life of a humble, godly priest, God finally broke His silence. He sent Gabriel, who stands in His presence.

The fifth movement, as this story continues to unfold, is an extraordinary announcement. An extraordinary announcement in verses 13 to 17. Zacharias didn't know it, but God was about to provide the answer to two prayers. Look at verse 13: "But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard [your prayer has been heard], and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.'" Actually, it was the answer to two prayers of Zacharias. One of them was his personal prayer for a child, that he and Elizabeth had stopped praying probably more than decade before, when her cycle had ended, and it was clear they were not to have a child. It was also the answer to his priestly prayer for the Messiah. Because at that very minute, as he presented the incense offering like all of the priests before him, he would have been praying that God would send the Messiah, that He would send the Redeemer, Savior. The angel said, Zacharias, you're going to have a son. And you're to call him John, which means "God is gracious," because He's going to answer both of your prayers.

That brings us to the description of John in verses 14 to 17. As Gabriel continues his extraordinary announcement, he tells us about Zacharias' son. First of all, the response to his birth will be one of joy, both by his parents and many beyond his parents. In verse 15, the nature of his character and his gifting: he will be a lifelong Nazirite like Samuel and Sampson before

him, “and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Then in verse 16 and 17 we discover the nature of John’s ministry. Gabriel explains that his ministry will be twofold. And last week we ended by looking at the first part of his ministry. He was to be, according to verse 16, a prophet preaching repentance. Notice verse 16: “He will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.” In Old Testament language, that’s the language of repentance: to turn away from their sin, away from their waywardness, away from their idols, to God. And that’s exactly what John the Baptist did. We looked last time **at** his actual message that’s recorded for us. It’s preached in the New Testament.

Now today, as we prepare our hearts for the celebration of the birth of Christ, I want us to come to the other part of Gabriel’s extraordinary announcement about the ministry of John. Not only would he be a prophet preaching repentance, but he would be a messenger preparing for Messiah. Notice verse 17. This is extraordinary. “It is he [that is, John] who will go as a forerunner before Him.” You’ll notice in our English text the words “as a forerunner” are in italics. That’s because they don’t appear in the original. Literally, the text simply says, “It is he who will go before him.” Now, those words are borrowed from two prophecies in Malachi. And both of those of Malachi prophecies were partially fulfilled at the first coming of Christ; both will ultimately be fulfilled at the second coming. But in the first coming, the messenger who was to come in the spirit and power of Elijah, was John the Baptist. Gabriel told Zacharias that his son John would be the messenger that Malachi had promised.

And notice again verse 17. He goes before him. The question is who—to use poor grammar—is him? Who is him? Well, go back to Malachi. Malachi 3 is one of the prophecies this is taken from. And notice, the Lord says through Malachi (this was, again, 400 years before Christ), “Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me.” You’ll notice “Me” is all capitals, or excuse me, is capitalized, because it’s a clear reference to God. “And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple.” So, who is the messenger to go before? He is to go before the Lord Himself. The Lord Himself. Now go over to chapter 4, verse 5. “Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord.” Again, you’ll see that in both cases, as I said, these prophecies will be ultimately fulfilled in the future, but they were partially fulfilled in the first coming. And the

messenger in both cases goes before the Lord. So those verses are a promise at the end of the Old Testament record that the Lord Himself would enter time and space, and the messenger would go before the Lord.

Now, you have to understand the picture here. **It's** the picture of an ancient monarch who intended to visit part of his realm, part of his kingdom. But before he went and visited, he first sent an official representative before him in order to prepare the way. I mean, the same thing happens for dignitaries in our day. Think about our own President. The Office of the President of the US actually has two or three distinct offices that exist to prepare the way before he arrives somewhere. He has staff that goes **and** prepares for his arrival. They deal with such issues as transportation, lodging, food, protocols, safety, etc. In fact, here's how one news source describes it:

A week before every presidential trip, often longer for foreign travel, advance teams from the US Secret Service, the White House, and other government agencies, trace every step the president will take, as well as alternatives for every contingency. Plans are drawn up for who will sit where on Air Force One and which vehicle, in the President's mile-long motorcade, specific aides will occupy. Nothing is taken for granted, [listen to this] not even the occupants of the presidential elevator. Before the President leaves the White House, even who will be with him in a specific elevator, is planned. Those who prepare for his visits are specially trained. They're experienced, and they are equipped.

The same was to be true for Messiah's representative who was sent to prepare the way before Him. Notice verse 17. His messenger would serve "in the spirit and power of Elijah". In other words, his ministry would have the same attitude, the same unique power, and even the same powerful results as that of Elijah, a man whom God used to turn an entire nation from idolatry back to God. That's exactly what John would be like in his time. He would fulfill his ministry in the spirit and power of Elijah. He was preparing for the Messiah.

The question is how? How was John to prepare for the Messiah? In two specific ways, and I want you to see them. First of all, by preparing the people spiritually, by preparing the people spiritually. Gabriel uses the words of Malachi and says, notice verse 17, that John will “turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous.” That’s how John will prepare people for the Lord’s arrival. His ministry will produce real repentance and change in people’s lives and attitudes and relationships. Children and fathers would be reconciled. Those who were disobedient as a pattern of life would begin to manifest true change. And it wouldn’t be merely external change. Notice, it would be at the heart level. Notice how verse 17 puts it. They would manifest “the attitude of the righteous.” It would be something that happened inside of them.

Now over in Luke 3, Luke quotes another prophecy about John. I want you to look at it with me. **Luke 3.** Here we have a graphic illustration of the radical changes that must occur in a heart and life to truly prepare for the Lord. Verse 2 of chapter 3. Luke 3:2: “[During] the... priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness.” Here he begins his ministry. And as is often stated in the Old Testament, “the Word of the Lord came to” one of the prophets, it comes **to** John. Verse 3: “And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance.” By the way, what he was really preaching was, just like **a** Gentile would have to undergo proselyte baptism to become a true Jewish believer, he’s saying, even to the Jews, you need proselyte baptism. You are so far from a knowledge of the true God, that you’re no better than Gentiles. You need to experience what they needed to experience in order to be prepared for the Messiah’s coming. And it was, notice verse 3, “for the forgiveness of sins.” Baptism didn’t produce that forgiveness; instead, it was the fruit of that forgiveness. It was an expression of that forgiveness. Verse 4: “...as it is written [**in the word**] in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness.’” This is a quote from Isaiah 40, verses 3 and following which, again, say that before Messiah comes there would be a messenger. And his responsibility would be to clear the way for Messiah, so that everything would be prepared for His arrival. Notice verse 4 goes on to say, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord. Make His paths straight.’” The voice of one crying. By the way, **that** Greek word refers to a loud cry or a shout that can be heard from a distance. And what would John shout to the people?

“Make ready the way of the Lord,
Make His paths straight.
[Verse 5] Every ravine will be filled,
And every mountain and hill will be brought low;
The crooked will become straight,
And the rough roads smooth;
And all flesh will see the salvation of God.”

Now again, you have to put yourself back into those times. Roads in the ancient world were not often properly maintained. And so, again, the king who wanted to go visit a part of his realm **would** send out his advance team. He would send out a herald announcing that the king is coming. You need to make ready. The roads need to be repaired. You don't want the king riding through potholes, and so the roads coming into the city need to be prepared for his coming. It involved everything that modern road building requires but with primitive tools and equipment. It meant removing obstacles and building bridges and causeways and straightening crooked roads and filling in valleys and leveling hills. That's what God was doing for the Messiah through John.

But it wasn't a physical road God has in mind. The image is of preparing the road to a city in preparation for the king's arrival. But the meaning speaks of preparing the paths of your own life and heart, so that you're ready when Messiah comes. It's a call for repentance. If you and I are to be ready for the coming of Messiah, John is saying to the people, then we must be prepared spiritually and morally. The humble will be exalted. The proud and arrogant humbled. The crooked life made straight. The rough made smooth. You know what he's talking about? This is nothing less than conversion. This is nothing less than what theologians call regeneration. It's what happens when a person truly comes to Christ. Christianity isn't about some flippant decision. Christianity is about the radical change of a person's heart by the work of God. Happens in a moment in time when you go from being spiritually dead to spiritually alive, and the response to that is a response of repentance, humility, the crooked made straight, the rough made smooth. And the end of verse 17 explains the goal; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. That was John's ministry. His message of repentance for forgiveness of sins and

his demand that even Jews be baptized as proselytes, were both intended to prepare the way for Messiah, because you were only ready to receive the birth of Messiah and His ministry if you had a regenerate heart; if you had a heart that had been truly changed by God.

There's one more crucial part to John's ministry related to the Messiah, and this is the second way that he carried it out. And that is identifying the Messiah specifically; identifying the Messiah specifically. In both Isaiah 40 and in Malachi 3, God had announced that He would send His messenger, who would be like Elijah, to announce the coming of the Messiah. And to make sure that we knew who the messenger was, he announced it to Zacharias, a humble priest, during the one time in his life he was in the temple burning the incense, when the eyes of all Israel would have been on him. The messenger, Gabriel says, is going to be your son, John. God sent John to identify the Messiah. In a moment I'll show you how he accomplished that mission, but let's look back at Luke chapter 1 and continue to see the final parts of the story unfold.

We've seen the angel Gabriel's announcement to Zacharias. It was truly extraordinary. But there's one final movement in the story in Luke 1. We'll call it the various reactions. The various reactions in verses 18 to 25.

The first reaction is that of Zacharias, and it is surprising unbelief. Look at verse 18: "Zacharias said to the angel, 'How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years.'" You know, if you read that in the English text, it sounds a lot like Zacharias is saying the same thing that, six months later, Mary will say to Gabriel. But in the original language they're not alike at all. Let me share it with you. Her question—look at verse 34, chapter 1, verse 34. Here's Mary: "Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'" Her question, literally, in the Greek text reads like this: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" You see, her wording shows that she didn't doubt that this was going to happen. It will be. Her question was how, exactly, God intended to accomplish it since she was a virgin. How will this be? How is it going to happen? It will be, but how? But listen to Zacharias' question from the Greek directly. He said, *According to what will I know this? According to what will I know this? For I myself*, he emphasizes it in the original language – "For I [myself] am an old man and my wife is advanced in [her days] years." You know what he was really asking? Not,

how is this going to happen, and I know it's going to happen. His question was, *how will I know this is really going to happen?* Although he'd prayed for a son for many years, although God had arranged for him to have the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to burn incense on that day in the Holy Place, though Gabriel appeared to him and told him he would have a son, Zacharias didn't believe it. He wanted a sign. He essentially said to Gabriel, *Listen, Gabriel, come on. People my age don't have children. I want a sign that this is really going to happen.* Obviously, this is the sin of unbelief. God sent Gabriel to tell him what was going to happen, and he refuses to believe it.

But God even uses Zacharias' sin for His own purposes, because Zacharias' refusal to believe makes it clear that he was not some high strung, gullible priest. He wasn't there that day hoping to see a miracle. He wasn't subject to the power of suggestion. This was a man—think about this—who doubted what he was told by an angel in the temple. Let me ask you this morning. In your heart of hearts, are there times when you really wish that God would send an angel to talk to you like He did to these people? Listen, God has given us something so much better. You have the written Word of God. Zacharias' reaction was surprising unbelief.

Next, the text gives us the reaction of God. And God's reaction is what we'll call an inconvenient sign. Zacharias, back in verse 18, had said, "I [myself] am an old man." So in verse 19, "The angel answered and said to him, 'I [myself] am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.'" You know, this is one of the most humorous moments in all the Bible to me. If angels rolled their eyes, Gabriel rolled his eyes. Like, really? I'm an angel. I'm talking to you in the temple. You believe you're really seeing an angel. You believe I am everything that I'm communicating that I am. And you think God's not going to pull this off? Really! Now, we talked about Gabriel last time, so I won't go into any of the details; but likely one of the archangels along with Michael. We can't be sure of that, but certainly one of two angels mentioned by name in the Bible.

And here he tells us two crucial things about this encounter. Notice, first of all, he says that he normally stood in God's presence, but has been sent by God to speak to Zacharias. And then he says the message itself came from God, literally, "to bring you this." And the word is the word

that's often translated, *gospel*. "To bring you this good news." Verse 20: "And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time." Zacharias wanted a sign. How do I know that this is going to happen? God says, *OK I'll give you a sign, a very inconvenient one, because, for nine-plus months, you're not going to be able to speak or make a sound*. And perhaps not able to hear either, because one of the words that's used, later in our text, implies and is often used for **the** inability to hear also. So, it's possible he was unable to speak and unable to hear for nine months. Why? Gabriel says, "Because you did not believe my words."

Now, what makes Zacharias different than others before him? I mean, others in biblical history had asked for signs to strengthen their faith. Of course, God wasn't real keen on that either, **but** He allowed them in cases. Zacharias didn't want a sign to strengthen his faith. He wanted a sign because he simply didn't believe what the angel had said. You know, when I read that, I'm reminded of us, reminded of myself, and perhaps you're reminded of you. How often we have the Word of God right in front of us, we read what God has said, and how often are we so slow to believe I; so slow to believe it. Listen, it's important to understand that God takes it very seriously when we refuse to believe His Word. I love how verse 20 ends. Gabriel says, Oh by the way, my words "will be fulfilled in their proper time." Folks, it's still that way in God's economy. My faith or unbelief, your faith or your unbelief don't change God's reality.

But Zacharias, being mute, wasn't merely a chastening of his own unbelief. Nor was it merely a sign to prove God's promise to him. It was also a sign to all Israel. Remember, while all this is happening inside the Holy Place at the hour of prayer, the courts outside (the court of the priests, the court **of** Israel for the Jewish males, the court of the women, all) would have been filled with people praying, because this happened at either the morning or, more likely, the afternoon hour of prayer. Usually after the priest offered the incense on the Altar of Golden Incense and representing the prayers of the people who were praying outside, he would quickly withdraw. He would go out onto those massive steps going down from the porch of **the** temple proper and join other priests on those steps. And together they pronounced the great priestly blessing recorded in Numbers 6:

The Lord bless you, and keep you;
The Lord make His face shine on you,
And be gracious to you;
The Lord lift up His countenance on you,
And give you peace.

And they're waiting. Verse 21: "The people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple." You see, the Jewish Talmud said that it was best for the priest who offered the incense to leave quickly, so that he was in no danger of profaning the temple. Verse 22: "But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them; and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he kept making signs to them, and remained mute." Think about this. He comes out of the temple after this delay. Normally, again, he would have put the incense on those burning coals, **the** smoke and incense would've begun to rise, and he would've quickly backed away and left **the** temple and gone to the steps. But instead, he's had this long conversation with Gabriel. And so, the people are waiting. What's happened to him? Why hasn't he come out? He comes out to say the priestly blessing, and he discovers that the angel's word has come true immediately. And he can't say it. He can't speak. His inability to speak punctuated that something dramatic had happened while he was in the temple. He could only make signs to try to explain it.

You can only imagine what must have gone on the rest of his time of service at the temple. Verse 23 says, "When the days of his priestly service were ended, he went back home." So, he stayed the rest of his one of two weeks of annual service there at the temple. He may have tried to explain. In fact, if he was normal and human, he would've tried to explain in some way (in writing or in some other way) to those who were around him what had happened to him while he there in the temple, what the angel had told him. But then when the time was up, he went home. He went to the hill country. And we're reminded that God's response to Zacharias was to give him and all Israel a sign. Zacharias would be mute for the next nine months.

That brings us to one last response in verses 24 and 25. It's the response of Elizabeth, and it's a grateful heart. "After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant." You can only imagine what it was like when Zacharias came home. He's over 60 years of age. They're past child-bearing age. And he comes home, and he can't speak. Perhaps, he can't hear. And he's trying to communicate to Elizabeth what had happened to him, while he was in the temple. It would've been enough to just say, *I had the experience of a lifetime. I was selected by lot to go into the temple to offer the incense offering.* That would've been enough, but he had far greater news than that: *we're going to have a son, and our son is going to announce the arrival of Messiah.*

After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant, and she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying, "This is way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men."

Why seclusion for five months? Well, we're not told, but we can guess. I mean, the whole town knew that they had no children. Possibly, likely, they had heard that Zacharias claimed to have been visited by an angel in the temple and to have been promised a son. And so she kept herself in seclusion until it was obvious that she was pregnant and she was far enough along, so that she wouldn't add to the disgrace that she experienced in her culture, as those around her thought that perhaps she had done something, some secret sin that God was judging in her barrenness.

God enabled them to become pregnant miraculously. I mean, God had done this before with Abraham and Sarah. And here He did it again with this humble, simple priest from the hill country of Judea, Zacharias, and his wife Elizabeth. And He did it in answer to their very personal prayer for a son, and in answer to a priest's prayer that Messiah would finally come. And the answer was a man named John, "God is gracious," the messenger who would identify the Messiah.

Now that brings us to the big picture. Why? Why did God include this story of the announcement of the angel Gabriel to Zacharias in the Scripture? The short answer is because, ultimately, it's not about John. It's about Jesus. And its importance has to do with the reasons

that God sent John as Jesus' messenger. And they are the same three reasons that this story is critical for us as you and I prepare to celebrate Christmas on Tuesday. I just want you, for a moment, to think about the three reasons this story matters to us as we anticipate Tuesday and the celebration of our Lord's birth.

Reason number one, it proves the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. You see, there is no question that Jesus of Nazareth lived. It's true, not only in the biblical record, **it's** validated in secular history. Very rare are the genuine historians who doubt the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth. He lived. He lived in a real place on this planet, at a real time some 2000 years ago. And He lived and claimed to be Israel's Messiah. He claimed to be the Savior of the world. He claimed to be God's only Son. He claimed that He came to give His life as a payment to God to rescue sinners from God's justice against their sins. That's what He claimed. In Matthew, excuse me, in Mark chapter 10, He said, "...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, [and listen to this] and to give His life [as] a ransom [in the place of] for many." As a substitute for many. That's what Jesus said. This is what He claimed.

But in addition to His own claims, He was identified as Messiah by the messenger that the Old Testament had promised would come. That messenger, John, urges every one of us to recognize who Jesus really is, to trust in Him, and to follow Him. Turn over to John's gospel. Let me just show you this. John's gospel. Look at verse 6. We read it just few minutes ago in our Scripture reading. John 1:6: "There came a man sent from God, whose name was John." We just saw how obviously he was sent from God. The angel Gabriel announces him in the temple. They're enabled to have a child in their old age, miraculously. This is not just a normal kid. He was sent from God. Verse 7: "He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him." In other words, John is given so that people would believe in Jesus. "He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light."

So, what is it that John the messenger said about Jesus? Well, his testimony occurs beginning in verse 19. Notice verse 19 says, "This is the testimony of John..." Let me just—I wish I had time to walk you through this text. But let me just give you a list. And you can go back and look at this at your leisure, maybe even as you anticipate Tuesday. But notice, Jesus is, first of all—

here's the testimony of John—Jesus is the Lord. Verse 23: “He said, ‘I am [the] a voice’”, quoting Isaiah 40. He says, “I am [the] a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the LORD,’ as Isaiah the prophet said.” And the word “LORD” is in all caps in Isaiah’s prophecy, meaning it’s God personal name. He is, Jesus is, God. That’s the point. He’s God. Let me ask you, do you believe that? Do you believe Jesus of Nazareth, the man who lived on this planet 2000 years ago, is the Word incarnate, the One who was God but became flesh? That was John’s testimony.

His second point of his testimony is He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Look at verse 29: “The next day.” This is probably after the baptism of Jesus and then the 40 days of temptation. He sees Jesus coming. And the next day he saw Jesus coming to him, and he said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” That “Lamb of God” is probably a reference, not to a specific lamb that was sacrificed in the Old Testament, but to the whole system. He is the fulfillment of it all, from the daily sacrifice of the lamb that took place at the moment of the **morning and evening sacrifice** and prayer, to the Passover, to the Day of Atonement, to everything in between. Every time those animals were offered, they pictured this One. “Behold, the Lamb of God.” God’s Lamb. The One God has picked. “Who takes away.” The picture in that word is “one **who** takes upon himself.” There’s the substitution of Christ. He takes **the** sin of the world on Himself and carries it off. That’s the picture of that word. Behold, the Lamb of God who takes upon Himself the sin of everyone who would ever believe in Him. Listen, if you’re willing to come to Jesus Christ, He took your sin upon Himself, and He carried it away. It’s gone. And it’s not just for the Jewish people, it’s for the world. It’s for Jews and Gentiles alike. It’s for everyone. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Thirdly, He is the infinitely superior One. **Notice what** John says in verse 30. “This is He on behalf of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I...’” Now we read that, and we go, *Yeah-yeah, you know, that’s Jesus and John.* No, think about this. John was considered to be the holiest man of his time. No one was considered greater than he. He was a true prophet from God. But John said, *When it comes to Jesus, I’m not worthy to do **the** act of the lowliest slave and take off His sandals. He’s infinitely superior to me.*

He's also the preexistent One. Notice verse 30 goes on to say, "For He existed before me." Now again, if you know the story, it's like, wait a minute, that doesn't work. Physically, John was older than Jesus by at least six months, but he said He existed before me. What he's really saying is He was preexistent. Before He was born, He already existed.

He is—and I love this—the only One who produces real change on the inside. Notice in verse 33, I baptize with water but "this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit." You know what he was saying? He was saying, *Look, all I can do is put your body under water, and it cleanses your body. Your repentance may or may not have been genuine, and nothing really happens to you, but get wet. But here's One who can change you on the inside, because He, in the power of the Holy Spirit, can wash you inside and give you the power of the Spirit to change.* He is, verse 34—notice John's testimony; couldn't be any clearer than this. "I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God." This is the unique, one-of-a-kind Son of God. He is God the Son.

Then you have the testimony of John's disciples down in verse 45. He is a man, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph, and yet He's also the Messiah. Notice verse 45: "Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found Him of whom Moses and the Law and also the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.'" And verse 41 says, "We have found the Messiah."

That was the testimony of John. Let me ask you this morning, do you believe it? Do you believe the testimony of John? Do you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, the Man who actually was a man, who lived 2000 years ago, is the Messiah, **the** Anointed One, the One the Hebrew Scriptures promised, the Son of God, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world by the sacrifice of Himself? Listen, if you're here this morning and you're not a follower of Jesus Christ, understand this. In Christ, God offers you a complete and total pardon for all of your sins against Him. Past, present and future. He offers you a full and complete reconciliation with Him through Jesus the Messiah. He even offers to adopt you as His own son or daughter forever. Today, right now, you can accept God's gracious offer of the salvation that Jesus accomplished. **Why** would you wait?

You say, how should I respond? Well, it's here. It's here in John 1. You should repent of your sins and believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and follow Him. Notice John 1, verse 12. Go back to verse 11. It says, "He came to His own." That is, His own things, His own possessions. Remember, He created all things. "And those who were His own did not receive Him" - His people. Most of the people of Israel did not receive Him. Most of the people of the world did not receive Him. Verse 12: "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God." What does it mean to receive Him? "Even to those who believe in His name." Why do you believe? It's because you've been born of God. You've been changed by God, and therefore you believe. So, **my** point to you this morning, John's point to you this morning is, when you see who Jesus is, believe in Him.

You say, well, what does real faith look like? How do I know my faith is real or not? Well, look down in verse 43. Here's how you know. "The next day He purposed to go into Galilee, and He found Philip. And Jesus said to him, 'Follow Me.'" There's how you know whether or not you're really in Christ. Are you, every day of your life, truly following Jesus as your Lord and Teacher and Master? If you're not, then you're not His disciple. You've not come to genuine faith in Him. Genuine faith follows Jesus. And I plead with you to do that even today.

There's a second reason this story is important. Not only because it identifies who Jesus is and proves His identity and calls us to genuine faith, but secondly, for those of us who are already believers, it strengthens our faith. It strengthens the faith of those who already believe in Jesus. Go back to Luke 1. You remember how Luke began his gospel? Verse 3, he says,

It seemed fitting for me... having investigated everything [I'm about to write to you] carefully from the beginning, to write it out [to] you in consecutive order [in a logical, consecutive order], most excellent Theophilus [the one to whom he wrote]; so that [here it is, here's why it's written for us believers] so that you may know [**and** our text says] the exact truth about the things you have been [catechized in] you have been taught.

But, exact truth. **That** Greek word “exact truth” is a word which means *safety* or *certainty* or *security*. What he’s saying is, *I have written my gospel (including the very first story that we’ve studied together) in order that you, believers, might have certainty about the things you have believed*. The story’s here **to** underscore the reality of our faith. Listen, our faith is not wishful thinking. God miraculously announced a man by the name of John, a man that all Israel received, a historical person that was acknowledged in the writings of Josephus and other places outside the Scripture. And Israel embraced him as a true prophet. And that true prophet said *There He is*, because that was his job. Your faith isn’t based on slipping sand, but rather on the foundation of God’s revelation.

Thirdly, this story focuses our celebration of Christmas on worship. Look at the end of Luke 1. There’s a poem. You’ll see it even set apart as poetry in your Bible beginning in verse 68 of Luke 1. This poem has traditionally been called the Benedictus. You heard the choir sing it this morning. And the word *benedictus* is simply the Latin Vulgate translation of the very first word in this poem, blessed. Benedictus. Blessed. You’ll remember Zacharias was struck mute in the temple. And what was he supposed to do immediately after he came out of the temple? He was to pronounce the blessing, the benediction. But he couldn’t for nine months. But when John was born and his speech was restored, the first words out of his mouth were *this* benediction. Notice verse 67:

His father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:
“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
For He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people.”

Go down to verse 76. Speaking about John,

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
For you will go on [here it is again] before the Lord [Himself, Jesus of Nazareth]
to prepare His ways;
To give to His people the knowledge of salvation
By the forgiveness of their sins,

Because of the tender mercy of our God,
With which [and here's a description of Messiah] the Sunrise from on high will
visit us.”

It's like you and I live in darkness, and Jesus was a sunrise to shine, verse 79, “upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, [and] to guide our feet into [the way of shalom], the way of peace.” May Jesus really be the focus of our Christmas celebration. And may our celebration be just like that of Zacharias - worshipping Him. Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for this magnificent story. But beyond the story, thank You for the reality that it represents. Lord, thank You that You have proven to us who Jesus of Nazareth really was through this messenger You appointed, even as You promised at the end of the Hebrew Scriptures, 400 years before. Father we thank You that, through that truth, You call people to believe in Your Son. And Lord, I pray this morning that there would be some here who really see—maybe heard these things many times before—but this morning Your Spirit would be in the truth that they've heard, so that they really see and they really come to follow Jesus of Nazareth as their Lord, their Savior, their Messiah. Father, I pray that You would do that work this morning.

And Lord, I pray for most of us here who are already in Christ. May the story that we've studied, **may** the reality of the messenger You sent, only strengthen our faith. Remind us that these are not myths and fables. They're real people. And You miraculously intervened to prove these things to us, our faith is solid, the certainty of the things that we have believed. And Father, I pray that as we gather with family and friends on Tuesday to celebrate our Lord's birth, may He and He alone be the real focus of our celebration. And Father, may our celebration be worship, for He is Christ the Lord. We pray it in His name. Amen.