



When You Burst into Song

Luke 1:68-79

Christ the King Sunday, December 1, 2024

The first chapter of Luke is filled with drama—but not a “*Law-and-Order-Somebody’s-Gonna-Get-Hurt*” kind of drama. Rather, Luke chapter one is an upbeat-anything-can-happen kind of drama, kind of like a Broadway musical. And like a Broadway musical, the lead character—Zechariah—has been known to suddenly break out into song. That’s what verses 68-79 really are: a song. Our hymnal calls it “The Canticle of Zechariah.”

Some people just don’t get Broadway musicals. They go to see a performance of *Cats* and don’t understand why so many men and women are dressed as kitty cats prowling across a stage that has been transformed into Trashcan Alley.

And they really don’t get it when some of those same kitty cats burst into song.

Memory, all alone in the moonlight

I can smile at the old days

I was beautiful then.

Here’s the thing: *Cats* doesn’t ask you to figure it all out. *Cats* knows it’s not logical. *Cats* simply strives to invite you into the story and get to know the characters: Grizabella and Macavity and Bustopher Jones and Old Deuteronomy and all the rest.

When you come right down to it, the opening chapter of Luke doesn’t make much sense either:

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- ☆ Angels pop out of nowhere.
- ☆ A virgin learns she is going to become pregnant.
- ☆ An elderly priest learns his elderly wife is going to give birth to a child—even though the couple had tried for a lifetime to have a child, but to no avail.

And now—well past their prime, Zechariah and Elizabeth are going to have a child—and the angel predicted a son, no less!—a son who would prepare the way for the Messiah. It's not logical. But here's the thing: Luke chapter one knows that it goes against the grain of human logic, but Luke chapter one simply invites you to enter into the story and to get to know the characters.

Zechariah has his doubts and is rewarded by being struck dumb. For nearly a year he is unable to utter a single syllable.

Finally in due course of time Elizabeth gives birth to John the Baptist. It's a joyous occasion marked by the arrival of all the aunts, uncles, cousins and neighbors. They all want to name him Zechariah after his father, but the events of the past year have made a believer out of Zechariah and he is determined to be obedient to God.

"His name is John!" he insists and suddenly his tongue is loosed and he is able to speak. And what does he do? He bursts into song. Like a good Broadway musical, the song interprets the story, telling us what's *really* happening in Luke 1:68-79

⁶⁸ "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David

⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—

⁷² to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear

⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,

⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

The Song of Zechariah is really a prophecy, telling us in advance of the Gospel—in advance of the birth of Christ—that *now* God has come to his people with redemption and salvation. God has come to show mercy to his people and to fulfill the promise he made centuries before. And John—who is only eight days old—is destined to herald the coming of Messiah. Just a few short months later the Messiah himself is born in Bethlehem.

We don't know much about the early life of Jesus. We know that Joseph took him and Mary to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod. When it was safe to return to Israel, they settled

in Nazareth, and that's where Jesus grew up. Luke only gives us one tiny peek into his childhood when he was twelve years of age visiting Jerusalem with his family. But what about his formative years?

Adam Hamilton makes the convincing argument that “we can infer from the life and teachings of Jesus the profound impact Joseph had on Jesus’ faith. When Jesus looked for a metaphor to describe his relationship—and ours—to God, his primary form of addressing God was *Abba*—the Aramaic word for Papa. It is likely that even as a boy Jesus saw in Joseph a picture of the love and character of God.”¹

Our next glimpse of Jesus comes eighteen years later at his baptism. But just who was Jesus? Over the centuries some have proclaimed him as a teacher or even as a prophet—both to the exclusion of any claim of divinity.

C.S. Lewis challenges those who would make such claims in his milestone book *Mere Christianity*. He writes: “I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him, (which is) I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say.

“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

Christ was and is King of Creation, but never before has this green globe seen a King like Christ. He came to the earth not to be raised up on a pedestal, but to be raised up on the cross of Calvary, for that was the only way in which Christ could atone for our sins. But even there, his kingship is affirmed, albeit cruelly.

Consequently, Christ was led to Calvary where he was crucified between two common criminals. Luke chapter 23 tells us—

³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

³⁵ The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.”

³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”

³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

¹ Adam Hamilton, *The Journey*, pg. 51.

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⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

⁴³ Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Even in that place where death was certain and imminent, we catch a glimpse of eternity and life after death—not only for Jesus but for the repentant thief on the cross. *“Today you will be with me in paradise.”*

I find those words to be among the most hopeful words in the entire canon of scripture. Yes, Jesus died in accordance with human experience. But Jesus also lived because he reigns not only over creation, but because he also reigns over death and the grave. Jesus Christ is king!

The songwriter said it this way:

“For he who died on Calvary / is risen from the grave,
And Christ, our Lord, by heaven adored, / Is mighty now to save.”

The resurrection of Christ has eternal implications for us. In Colossians 1 Paul tells us that because of his victory over death, our citizenship has been transferred from the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of his beloved Son in whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins (vs. 13-14).

Christ is the firstborn from the dead and has become the head or origin of the church.

There is a strong sense among many that Paul’s words in Colossians are drawn from an ancient hymn about Christ and that Paul—like Zechariah—bursts into song in the middle of his epistle to the church at Colossae.

¹³ For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

And that, my friends, should give us a reason to burst into song.