**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**THREE PORTRAITS OF JESUS**

**Luke 2:22-52**

**INTRODUCTION**

Please open your Bibles to Luke 2. Today we continue our series called “The Gospel of Luke: Finding Certainty in a World of Doubt”. Over the past several weeks, we have worked our way through Chapter 1, where we have learned much from the stories of Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and John about the nature of doubt: our doubts regarding God’s promises, and God’s response to our doubts. But as much as doubt is a major theme in Luke’s gospel, it is not the central theme. The central theme is none other than the person and work of Jesus Christ.

This has been apparent even before Jesus formally enters the story. Luke 1 begins with the angel Gabriel announcing to an elderly priest named Zechariah that, by God’s miraculous intervention, he and his wife Elizabeth would finally have a son, John the Baptist. But though John would serve as the greatest prophet who ever lived, the announcement was not ultimately focused on him, but on who he came to prepare the way for. He came to prepare the way for Jesus.

Luke 1 continues with the angel Gabriel making another appearance, this time to a teenage girl named Mary. She is told that, as a virgin, she will miraculously conceive of a child. As impossible as God’s promise seemed to be, she trusted his promise, and as a result, she is held up as an example of faith for generations of believers who would come after her. But as exemplary as Mary was in her faith, the focus of the narrative is not on her miraculous conception, but on the one miraculously conceived in her womb. She would bear a son named Jesus, who would be great and called the Son of the Most High.

Luke 1 then concludes with the birth of John the Baptist to his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth. Neighbours and relatives marvel at this miracle, as this elderly couple had never been able to conceive. It was an occasion for celebration and rejoicing. But as joyous as Zechariah must have been at the birth of his own son, the song of praise he sang to God focused on another child, the child from the house of David named Jesus who would be like the sunrise from on high, shining the light of his truth into the darkness of humanity’s sin and death.

Finally, last week we turned over to Luke 2, where Luke’s narrative finally turns from promises about Jesus to Jesus himself. We heard from Pastor Rafi from Chapel Place that Jesus’ birth was a quiet affair, as he was born in a room reserved for animals and lain in a manger, without attendants, and without fanfare. It was in many respects a silent night, until out in the field, an angel appears to a lowly group of shepherds, declaring that the Messiah, Christ the Lord, the Saviour of the world, had been born. The silence is suddenly pierced by a heavenly choir of angels praising God for his great plan of salvation, which he would accomplish through Jesus Christ.

The gospel of Luke is about Jesus Christ, and how knowing him, learning from him, and accepting what he ultimately came to accomplish for us helps us resolve our doubt into faith.

Our text today is the beginning of Luke’s narration of Jesus’ life: his works, his identity, and teaching. This will make up the rest of this incredible book. Today, we will read a little about Jesus’ upbringing, about some of the defining moments in his early childhood, and hear Jesus’ first recorded words in Luke’s gospel. The title of this message is **Three Portraits of Jesus.** My aim today is to show you that **Certainty about Jesus comes from Jesus’ Certainty about Himself**.

We will have three points today, each representing a different portrait of Jesus taken from our text:

1. Jesus the Devout Jew
2. Jesus the Consolation of Israel
3. Jesus the Son of God

(1) **JESUS THE DEVOUT JEW**

I want to begin by drawing your attention to something Luke obviously wants to emphasize through his repeated use of certain words. Notice the various references to the Old Testament law, described as “the Law of Moses” and to “the Law of the Lord”:

* Verse 22: “And when the time came for their purification *according to the Law of Moses*…”
* Verse 23: “…as it is written *in the Law of the Lord*, ‘Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord’…”
* Verse 24: “…and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said *in the Law of the Lord*…”
* Verse 39: “And when they had performed everything *according to the Law of the Lord*, they returned into Galilee…”
* Verses 41-42: “Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at *the Feast of the Passover*. And when he was twelve years old, they went up *according to custom*.”

Luke’s reason for all these references to the Law of Moses and the Law of the Lord is to show us that Jesus came from a family that was fully devoted to the Lord. Jesus was raised as a devout Jew whose life was oriented around obeying the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is a very significant point, but before I explain its significance, let me first explain each of the ceremonies and laws mentioned in our text.

The first ceremony is in verse 22, where Luke writes about a time for purification. This refers to Mary’s purification following labour and birth. Leviticus 12 says the following:

“If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days…she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying…And when the days of her purifying are completed…she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering, and he shall offer it before the LORD and make atonement for her…And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons…” (Lev. 12:1-8)

There are three components to this Old Testament ritual: (1) wait for a 40 day period for the woman’s purification; (2) visit the priest at the Tent of Meeting following the purification period; and (3) present an offering to make atonement for her, which would either be a lamb, or for those who couldn’t afford a lamb, two turtledoves or two pigeons.

We see Mary and Joseph following this pattern. First, in verse 22, they wait for Mary’s period of uncleanness to pass before they travel to the Temple in Jerusalem (which replaced the Tent of Meeting), and then in verse 24 they offer the required sacrifice, not the lamb, which they couldn’t afford, but the pair of birds instead.

The second ceremony is in verse 22b and 23, where Luke writes “they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord’)”. In Exodus 13:1-2, it says

“The LORD said to Moses, ‘Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.’”

Jesus was Joseph and Mary’s firstborn, and as such, he was to be consecrated to the Lord. That meant that he belonged to God, and that his life was to be devoted to God’s service.

What’s interesting, however, is that it was expected that parents would redeem their firstborn child from service to the Lord. Numbers 18:15-16 says,

“[T]he firstborn of man you shall redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem. And their redemption price (at a month old you shall redeem them) you shall fix at five shekels in silver…”

It was typical for parents to ransom their first child by paying five shekels of silver, so that the child would be freed from the obligation of devoting himself to the service of the Lord. But there is no indication in our text that Joseph and Mary paid the ransom price. This tells us something very important about Jesus’ parents. They understood the special call that God had placed on Jesus’ life. The angel Gabriel had told Mary that Jesus would be called “the Son of the Most High”, and that “he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” (Luke 1:32-33). Mary and Joseph believed this promise, and therefore they chose not to redeem him from the Lord’s service.

The third and final ceremony is found in verses 41-42, where Luke writes that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, who is now a twelve year old boy, went up to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. According to Deuteronomy 16:16, all the men of Israel were expected to travel to Jerusalem three times a year for three major Jewish festivals:

“Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread (i.e. Passover), at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Booths.”

The Jewish historian Josephus notes that, in the 1st century AD, most Jewish men no longer made the annual trips to Jerusalem, presumably because many of the Jewish people at the time were scattered far from Jerusalem. In contrast, Luke tells us in verse 41 that Jesus’ parents went “every year” to the Passover Feast. Luke also tells us that, though only Joseph was required to make the journey, Mary always went with him. Luke is highlighting Mary and Joseph’s exceptional piety. They may have been poor, but they possessed something much more precious than money: the fear of God.

What’s the point of all this? Why is Luke so intent on showing us that Jesus’ parents fulfilled all the requirements of God’s laws, not only as individuals, but as a family? His point is simple. He wants to show us that Jesus didn’t come to establish a new religion. He came to fulfill an ancient one.

If Jesus had come to establish a new religion, then all his and his parents’ rule-keeping would have been irrelevant. Luke wouldn’t have cared about his parents’ faithfulness to Jewish law, and he wouldn’t have recorded any of it in his gospel. But he does record it, and he records it in great detail, because the faithfulness of Jesus’ parents to Jewish law mattered. It mattered because it showed that Jesus himself satisfied all the law’s demands, even as a little baby. Jesus was not exempt from the law. Nor did he come to show that it was all wrong. Instead, he honoured it, upheld it, kept it, and most importantly, fulfilled it.

Jesus’ coming was spoken of throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, from Genesis to Malachi. At the very beginning of time, Jesus was the promised deliverer who would crush the serpent’s head. When God called Abraham, Jesus was the promised offspring who would bring blessing to the nations. When Moses prepared Israel to enter the Promised Land without him, Jesus was the promised prophet who would speak the very words of God. And when David reigned in the Golden Age of Israel’s history, Jesus was the promised king who would reign on David’s throne forever. Jesus did not come to establish a new religion. He came to fulfill an ancient one. As Jesus himself would say in Matthew 5:17,

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

Remember that Luke is writing his gospel to a Gentile Christian named Theophilus who struggled with uncertainty regarding the claims of Christianity. One of the reasons he may have doubted was that Christianity seemed to be a new religion. It was like a fledgling in the pantheon of world religions. And as a fledgling religion, how could he be confident that it was true?

Luke addresses that concern by showing Theophilus that Christianity was not a new religion. It was not merely a fledgling religion in the pantheon of world religions. Judaism was the fledgling religion, and Christianity was its fulfillment. Christianity was not young and immature. It was ancient and fully mature.

This gives Christianity a unique sense of credibility. When we’re looking to hire a company to do work for us, we consider how long they’ve been around. We want to know that it has a track record of success, and that it’s not just “here today, gone tomorrow”. The same is true of Christianity. It is not a new religion. It is an ancient one, and that gives us one reason to be confident in its credibility.

(2) **JESUS THE CONSOLATION OF ISRAEL**

This shows us a little about *who* Jesus was. He was a devout Jew who fulfilled the Old Testament law. Now we transition to *what* Jesus came to do. This leads to our second portrait of Jesus: He is the Consolation of Israel.

Verses 25 and 36 tell us about two other devout Jews named Simeon and Anna. There are several parallels between these two individuals. Both are characterized by their devotion to the Lord. Both are waiting for the same thing: Simeon is waiting for “the consolation of Israel” in verse 25, and Anna is eager to speak to those who long for “the redemption of Jerusalem” in verse 38. Both of them respond with gratitude and joy at the coming of Jesus. Jesus is the consolation of Israel, and Jesus is the redemption of Jerusalem. In the figures of Simeon and Anna, one man and one woman, all of humanity is represented in recognizing that Jesus is the One whom God had sent to bring consolation and redemption to his people.

We could spend a lot of time thinking about Jesus being the consolation of Israel, but at this point I actually want to turn our attention to Simeon. I have personally received much benefit this past week from meditating on Simeon’s example, and so I want to share some of these insights with you.

Verse 25 says that Simeon was waiting for “the consolation of Israel”. “Consolation” means comfort in the midst of grief. When a loved one dies and your friends surround you with hugs and words of support and affection, that’s consolation. When you’re in the middle of a very difficult personal trial, and your family comes alongside you to help you carry your burdens, that’s consolation. When we are grieved, we need to be consoled.

The remarkable thing about Simeon is that he wasn’t waiting for his own consolation. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel. We tend to wait for our own consolation most don’t we? Life seems to be a pattern put on replay: life is good, and we don’t seem to need others; life gets bad, now we need comfort. Our lives are characterized by the comfort we need and receive. Don’t get me wrong. There’s nothing wrong with needing to be comforted. Needing comfort is a natural thing, and receiving comfort is a good thing. But what distinguished Simeon was that he was so radically other-centered, so focused on the well-being of others, that his deepest desire was to see God’s people comforted.

That was a distinguishing mark of his life. We don’t know much about him, but one of the few things Luke records about him is the fact that he was “waiting for the consolation of Israel”. That was the legacy he left. It was the reputation he obtained amongst his family, friends, and neighbours from a lifetime of speaking to them about his passions, longings, and desires. Simeon’s example challenges us to ask ourselves what our legacy will be, what we will be known for. Will we be known as people who longed most deeply for our own comfort, or will we be remembered as people who desired above all else the comfort of God’s people?

As we continue on in our text, we get to some familiar territory. Throughout our study of the Gospel of Luke so far, we have repeatedly seen the pattern of God’s promise given, God’s promise answered, and God’s promise responded to. That’s exactly what we see here. God promises Simeon that he will see the Messiah before he dies in verse 26, that promise is fulfilled in verses 27-28 as Simeon is led by the Spirit into the Temple where he sees the baby Jesus, and then he responds with a hymn of praise to God in verses 29-32.

Once again, Luke wants to show us that, when God makes a promise, he will surely keep it. But this time, he doesn’t keep his promise to a main character in the story. He keeps his promise to a little known character who has minimal significance in redemptive history. In other words, he keeps his promise to someone who is just like us. If God kept his promise to someone like Simeon, then we can have confidence that he will keep his promises to us as well.

Now as we reach Simeon’s hymn, we reach the most important part about him that I want us all to see. His hymn begins in verses 29-30, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation.” Think about what this means. Having finally seen the consolation of Jesus in little baby Jesus, Simeon says he’s ready to die.

When would you say you’re ready to die? Most of us say we’re not ready to die until we’ve accomplished certain things in life. We want to scale the corporate ladder, we want our children to achieve certain successes, or we want to make a whole lot of money. Many of us may even say that we would never be ready to die. There’s always more we want to do, more we want to accumulate, more we want to accomplish. We want to keep on living until death forces us to stop.

That wasn’t Simeon. He knew what God wanted him to do, and once he did it, there was nothing else he felt he needed to do. Yes, he was known as a righteous and devout man, a reputation that only comes from a lifetime of faith and obedience to God. But apart from his daily obedience and faith, he had one special task in life, and one task only: to announce that God’s salvation, the consolation of Israel, had come in the person of Jesus Christ. That’s what he does in his hymn, and having done that, he tells the Lord that he is finally ready to go home. As one commentator puts it,

“Simeon is like the watcher who can leave an assigned post because the anticipated event has come.” (Darrell Bock, p. 241)

How would you respond if God’s will for your life was to simply watch for something. Watch for days, watch for years, watch for an entire lifetime, until finally your watching turns to seeing, you announce that what you have been watching for has come, and that’s it. You have accomplished your life’s purpose. Time to die. Would you feel that your life had been wasted? Or would you say, like Simeon, that you can now depart in peace, knowing that you had been faithful to do all that the Lord required of you?

Everyone wants their lives to count for something. That’s not a bad thing. What makes it a bad thing is wanting your life to count *on your own terms*. We want to define what a meaningful life looks like, and we refuse to let God define that for us. We need to be more like righteous and devout Simeon, who defined a life that counted *on God’s terms*. Most of us here would affirm that God has a plan for our lives. But most of us would also struggle with accepting that God’s plan for our lives is different from the plans we have for ourselves. Simeon challenges us to accept God’s plan for our lives even if it doesn’t match up with our own.

Before Simeon goes, however, he has one word of warning for Mary in verse 34: “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

Jesus is the consolation of Israel. He will bring comfort to God’s people. But before he brings comfort, he will bring pain. Many in Israel who think they stand with God’s people will fall, as what they really believe about God will be revealed by how they respond to Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate sign of who truly loves God and who doesn’t. Those who believe in him, receive him, trust him, and submit to him demonstrate the love that they have in their hearts for God. Those who do not believe in him, receive him, trust him, and submit to him show that they do not love God, even if they say that they do. Jesus came to bring comfort to his people, but before that would happen, he had to define who his people truly are, and the process of defining his people would cause much pain and anger.

(3) **JESUS THE SON OF GOD**

This leads to our third portrait of Jesus: Jesus the Son of God. We read in verses 39-40 that, after these events, Jesus’ family returned to their hometown of Nazareth, and “Jesus grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was with him.” Remember that one thing Luke is doing is he’s contrasting John the Baptist with Jesus. John was a great prophet, indeed the greatest prophet who ever lived, but as great as John was, Jesus was greater. John’s upbringing was described in 1:80:

“And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance in Israel.”

John’s growth was notable. He became “strong in spirit”. Strength in the Spirit defined him. Jesus also grew strong, but his strength was accompanied by the filling of wisdom and the favour of God. In other words, as Jesus grew, he was filled with the wisdom of the Holy Scriptures. He read them, memorized them, and applied them. And in the story to follow, Jesus shows just how much he understood them.

Jesus, now twelve years old, travels to Jerusalem for the Passover along with his parents, their relatives, and their acquaintances. Picture a large caravan of people, camels and all, travelling the dusty round together. Sometimes the kids are with their parents, other times they’re with their friends. It’s a mass of people who are collectively looking after all the children together. When the Feast was over, Mary and Joseph packed up and set off for Nazareth. Jesus wasn’t with them, but that wasn’t a big deal, as they figured that he must have been with another one of the families.

After a full days’ travel, it was finally time for all the kids to return to their parents. But where was Jesus? He didn’t seem to be with anyone! Mary and Joseph can’t believe it. They just had a “Home Alone” moment, except Jesus wasn’t home alone. He was alone in the big city of Jerusalem.

It takes Mary and Joseph another day to travel back to Jerusalem, making it two days since they had seen Jesus, and finally, on the third day after they had initially left Jerusalem, they find Jesus. And what they see shocks them.

Jesus had been by himself by more than two days, this twelve year old boy alone in the big city. But Jesus isn’t harmed. Jesus isn’t afraid. Jesus isn’t even anxious. Instead, he’s calmly sitting among the teachers of the law, the guardians of Scripture, asking them questions and answering their questions. And as Jesus engaged in dialogue with them about the Scriptures, the teachers of the law weren’t just tolerating him. They were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

They shouldn’t have been amazed if they knew who Jesus truly was. To them, he was just a sharp 12 year old boy. But what they didn’t know was that Jesus was the Word incarnate, the divine author of the Scriptures himself who had come to teach the Scriptures and fulfill them. None of them knew this. Not the teachers of the law, not even his parents.

But Jesus knew. Jesus knew who he was. His mother chastises him in verse 48, “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold your father and I have been searching for you in great distress.” His answer is stunningly simple and jaw-dropping in its implications: “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

In this simple reply, Jesus reveals his self-awareness of his true identity. Jesus had to be in the Temple because he knew he was the Son of God. God was his Father, and since the Temple was God’s house, Jesus had to be there in his Father’s house. No one had taught him this, not the teachers who devoted their lives to studying the Scriptures, and not his mother who heard directly from the angel Gabriel who testified to her about the identity of her son. No one had taught him who he really was, but no one needed to teach him. Even as a twelve year old boy, Jesus knew who he was, and he knew that his allegiance to his eternal, divine Father was greater than his allegiance to his temporary, earthly parents.

Verse 50 tells us that no one understood what this meant, not even his mother. Simeon had prophesied 12 years earlier that a sword would pierce through Mary’s soul. This was the first taste of that pain, the realization that Jesus was not, first and foremost, *her* son. He was *God’s* Son, and he would do his Father’s will regardless of the cost, even if it pierced through his mother’s soul, and even if it cost him his very life.

And doing the Father’s will *would* cost him his life, for the Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners like you and me by dying on a cross in our place. The consolation he would bring to God’s people would cost something of infinite value: the life of the divine Son of God. But he would pay it, and he would pay it willingly, so that all who put their trust in him would be forgiven of their sin, and together with Jesus, call with one voice on God as our loving, heavenly Father.

Jesus then returns with his parents and was submissive to them, showing that although his ultimate allegiance was to his Heavenly Father, he was also obliged to submit to his earthly parents. In this way, Luke shows once again that Jesus was obedient to the Old Testament Scriptures in every way as he continued to grow in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man.

**CONCLUSION**

In these three portraits of Jesus, we see just how different the Biblical Jesus is from the Jesus of our culture. Our culture thinks Jesus started a new religion called Christianity when in fact he came to fulfill the ancient faith of the Jews. Our culture thinks Jesus’ life goal was to teach people how to live ethically, when in truth he came to bring consolation to God’s people through his death on a cross. And our culture thinks that Jesus was just a man who lived two thousand years ago, when in reality he was the Son of God who has no beginning and no end.

This Jesus is worthy of belief, worthy of trust, worthy of absolute devotion, and worthy of worship. He is our God, He is our Saviour, and He is our Lord. May we all, by the grace of God, be as certain about him as he was about himself, that we may live in the joy of his presence forever.