

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / December 12, 2021 / Pastor Jeff Harrison
The Redemptive Disruption of Jesus' Birth
Disrupting the Darkness (Luke 1:5-79)

Welcome and prayer

Welcome all, and especially guests, to our worship service and Christmas celebration! Right after this service, you can grab a drink and chat in our Hospitality Room down this hall or in the church coffee shop on the other end of the building.

The Christmas celebration will begin at 11 at the other end. To get there, go outside and up the little flight of steps in the middle of the building. We'll have many fun activities, live music, and lunch. And before we get to all that fun and food, let's ask for God's help in receiving from His Scriptures, as I lead us in prayer...

A story reminds us that there's darkness in our world

Some time ago I read *Jayber Crow*, a novel by Wendell Berry. It's the life story of Jayber Crow, a single man who abandons his plans to pastor, becoming a small-town barber instead. Only he still ends up being a pastor of sorts to the townspeople, available when someone needs to talk.

One night, one of the townspeople, Mat Feltner, stops by. Mat's boy, Virgil had been killed a couple of years before, early in World War 2. As Jayber is up late reading, Mat stops by to see if he can talk, hoping to distract himself from troubled thoughts about his son Virgil. So Mat and Jayber talk aimlessly for a while about things like the weather, and then a troubled silence comes. Here Jayber continues the story, in his own words...

"Trying to end it [*the troubled silence*], I said finally, 'Well, we've had a time,' speaking of the weather. And Mat said, 'Yes, we've had a time,' speaking of the war. We spoke in very general terms, then, of the war and other trials of life in this world. Mat said, 'Everything that will shake has got to be shook.' 'That's Scripture,' I said, and he nodded. Trying to comfort him, I said, 'Well, along with all else, there's goodness and beauty too. I guess that's the mercy of the world.'

Mat said, 'The mercy of the world is you don't know what's going to happen.' And then after a pause, speaking on in the same dry, level voice as before, he told me why he had

been up walking about so late. He had had a dream. In the dream he had seen Virgil as he had been when he was about five years old: a pretty little boy who hadn't yet thought of anything he would rather do than follow Mat around at work. He looked as real, as much himself, as if the dream were not a dream. But in the dream Mat knew everything that was to come.

He told me this in a voice as steady and even as if it were only another day's news, and then he said, 'All I could do was hug him and cry.' And...I came down and went over and sat beside Mat. If he had cried, I would have. We both could have, but we didn't. We sat together for a long time and said not a word. After a while, though the grief did not go away from us, it grew quiet. What had seemed a storm wailing through the entire darkness seemed to come in at last and die down. Mat got up then and went to the door. 'Well. Thanks,' he said, not looking at me even then, and went away."¹

That story really struck me. The haunting reality of losing your son in war, and then having this dream, where your son is just a 5-year-old little boy who just wants to follow you around. In this dream, you know your son's fate as an 18-year-old soldier, but you're powerless to stop it, and so all you can do is hug him and cry.

Relevance: we must deal with the darkness of the world

The world can be a dark place, even at Christmastime. Feelings of overwhelm at all the expectations, stresses, and difficult relationships to navigate or deep loneliness in moments where you're reminded, like Mat Feltner, of a loved one who's passed.

If we peer too much at all the darkness, doubt, anxiety, and despair can flood us, harming our health, relationships, and trust in God. You or I could reach a point where we can't see the mercy of the goodness and beauty in the world, like a crisp, beautiful day with birdsong, a beloved child contentedly sighing as you hold their hand. You might instead, like Mat, think the only mercy in this world is that you don't know what bad thing will happen next.

¹ Berry, Wendell, *Jayber Crow*, p.148-150.

Orienting to God's Word: Ancient Israelites also experienced darkness

A little over 2,000 years ago, the nation of Israel, God's people, knew this kind of darkness. Herod, the local Roman leader, was a brutal tyrant who severely taxed and oppressed the Israelites, murdering anyone who got in his way, even his favorite wife.

And this oppression was not new. For the last 400 years the Israelites endured foreign nations occupying and oppressing them while also enduring a 400-year long silence from God; from Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, until their day.

So the Israelites have been waiting for generations for God to finally show up and do something about the darkness.

This morning we're going to see what God did for them and what difference it makes for us today. It's in the Gospel of Luke. So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to Luke, chapter 1, or you can follow along with the verses on the screen. And if you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers. What takes place this morning in Luke 1 is from a little over 2,000 years ago.

Teaching: God showing up in the darkness

Zechariah: we can doubt God will show up (5-23) – When things are not only dark nationally and spiritually, but the people also carry personal pain, as we see starting in verse 5. **(5-7)**

⁵ In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶ Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷ But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

We meet Zechariah and Elizabeth, a moral, godly couple, from moral, godly families. In verse 7, we move from respect to empathy for this gray-haired couple as we learn they carry pain from decades of infertility and unanswered prayers, like Abraham and Sarah, a godly couple from the Old Testament. Yet despite the darkness in their family and nation, Zechariah keeps serving faithfully as a priest for God.

The priests, like Zechariah, take turns serving at God's temple in Jerusalem, a place of worship where God's presence dwells in a special way. As Zechariah serves, he gets a very special assignment in verse 8: **(8-10)**

⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Each day at the temple, the priests make a morning and evening sacrifice. And one priest is chosen by lot, which is kind of like drawing straws to decide something. The priest chosen gets to go in the temple and offer incense to God. That incense, a material that produces a pleasant smell when burned, is a symbol of their prayers going up to God.

Since there are thousands of priests, a priest can only offer this incense once.² And today old Zechariah, nearing his career's end, finally gets his once in a lifetime chance to offer the incense. At this amazing moment, something amazing happens in verse 11. **(11-17)**

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

I don't know how comfortable or familiar you are with angels, but the Bible describes them as spiritual beings who worship and serve God, including as His messengers, like here.

Not only is Zechariah talking with an angel, but God is finally providing Zechariah his child, a special child who will bless the whole nation. God's people have waited 400

² Liefeld & Pao, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Luke-Acts (Revised Edition)*, in Luke 1 section. The ancient *Letter of Aristeas* says there were 18,000 priests.

long years in darkness for a word from God, and Zechariah's boy John will bring that word like Elijah, one of greatest Old Testament prophets, as John gets to prepare God's people to receive God's son! So let's see this godly priest's response to this amazing news of God showing up in verse 18.

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

Now Zechariah is a priest, currently in the temple where God's presence dwells in a special way, getting his once in a lifetime chance to offer incense at God's altar, and now he's talking to an angel. And that angel says to this old man, "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John." which sounds an awful lot like when God told an aged Abraham back in Genesis, "Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac."

Yet even in that faith-filled environment, Zechariah the priest doubts God's promise. Doubts that God really is showing up to disrupt the darkness in his life and world. It's too many wonderful things for him to receive by faith, as he just can't accept that his prayer requests were only deferred, not denied.

Maybe you can identify with Zechariah's doubt here. Maybe, like Zechariah, you're still doing the right kinds of things, like worshipping on Sunday mornings and loving your family, but underneath, you've got thoughts on how God should have already shown up to fix some darkness in your life.

As the desired answer to your prayers has been at least deferred, perhaps there's been an erosion of your trust in God, like termites eating away at the structure of a house.

Now perhaps you no longer believe God cares enough to show up in your situation. And maybe you doubt what God has promised us in the Scriptures. If you were friends with Zechariah, you might have been tempted to tell him before that the reasonable response for a childless old man under the shadow of a dark empire enduring 400 years of silence is to no longer hope.

If that's honestly where you're at this morning, you're not alone, I've been there. Zechariah is a godly guy, and he is there, doubting God and His promises. Like Zechariah

before you, God bless you for continuing to engage here in worship even as you struggle with these doubts.

While doubting God's promises and trustworthiness is common, it's also a dangerous place to be spiritually, hurting you and your ability to bless people. To only see what's happening on the human level and to doubt that God can work in darkness and to no longer trust in His promises is so dangerous spiritually that the angel has a strong response in verse 19, a severe mercy. **(19-23)**

¹⁹The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

²¹Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²²When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

Gabriel here is saying, "I'm in God's inner circle, and God Himself sent me to tell you this good news. Yet you're still doubting, demanding a sign, so your sign is that you won't speak a word until my words come true."

Now after offering the incense, the priest normally comes outside to give the people a blessing from God. I bet some people at the temple are there because their lives are broken, and they need God to break through. And Zechariah has just received news of how God is showing up to disrupt the darkness, but because of Zechariah's doubt, he is unable to share this good news the people desperately need.

Elizabeth: When God shows up, our lives are often disrupted (24-55) – Instead he continues his temple service in silence until it's time to return home. Verse 24: **(24-25)**

²⁴After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵"The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

In that culture it was very disgraceful for a woman to not have a child, and so pregnant Elizabeth celebrates God taking away her disgrace among the people.

But that doesn't mean everything is perfect. When God shows up to do something about the darkness in our lives and world, it's an incredible blessing, and our lives are also often disrupted in the process.

As God shows up to do something about the darkness, He often invites us to play a role in that. To participate in His work of bringing light and life to the darkness in people's lives. Sometimes in this service to God our lives end up disrupted, as we must say goodbye to our previous plans and to safety and stability as we walk out a disruptive call from God.

Much may change in our lives as God shows up. In Elizabeth's case, she has a husband who hasn't spoken in months, and given how Luke describes the couple, I don't think she's happy about that. ☺ And now Elizabeth is dealing with all the disruption of pregnancy as an elderly woman.

I can't speak to being pregnant, but we did take a birthing class where I learned all kinds of things, and then I witnessed two births up close and personal.

And pregnancy includes disruption. Imagine your elderly gray-haired grandma, already facing non-pregnancy related physical challenges, now adding on top of them weeks of morning sickness, weird cravings, added fatigue, weight gain, back pain, and so on.

And when baby John finally comes, so much comes with him. We learned in our birthing class about the mucus plug, the fluid, the painful contractions, the baby coming out messy, the placenta, sometimes the mother poops while birthing. And none of this disruption elderly Elizabeth undergoes is happening near a modern hospital with epidurals and emergency care if things go sideways.

Then after the birth there's the physical recovery, the possibility of post-partum depression, sleepless nights, all the energy raising a child requires, and the complexity of being a first-time parent in old age parenting a child with a divine mission.

And to add to all this disruption, for the last three months of elderly Elizabeth's pregnancy, they must also host a house guest: Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Pastor Dave will cover Mary's story next week, so we won't cover those verses. But Mary is also visited by the angel Gabriel and told that she too will become pregnant miraculously, in her case as a virgin, and that her Son will be the Son of God. Jesus is the One that Zechariah and Elizabeth's son will prepare the people to receive.

So Mary has taken on something incredible and incredibly challenging, as a very young woman. She needs help, so Gabriel mentions her relative Elizabeth who is also dealing with the disruption of God showing up through a miraculous pregnancy. We continue down in verse 39, as Mary comes to visit. **(39-45)**

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea,
⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.
⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?
⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Elizabeth's life is disrupted, but her focus has been on how God is showing up in the darkness, on God's favor towards her even in the disruption, So godly Elizabeth, filled with God's Spirit, cries out in praise that encourages Mary to continue to trust in God and His promises. Mary's faith is impacted, as she joins Elizabeth in praising God in verses 46-55. I like how another pastor expresses Elizabeth and Mary's lives, saying:

"As the Bible constantly illustrates, God's timing usually takes us by surprise. Sometimes, as with Elizabeth, God moves too slowly. Sometimes, as with Mary, he moves too quickly. Like Elizabeth, some of you in church today have been praying for a long time for something to happen. You think now that it may never happen. Obviously you can't make it happen, because if you could have, you would have. Clearly, you are not in control. Like Mary, others of you find that your lives are all disheveled this year. God has conceived something in your life that you didn't ask for. It doesn't make any sense. You are frightened, confused, and, clearly, you are not in control either.

When we come together in worship we are all confessing that, in spite of looking so different, at least we share a common limitation of not being in control of our lives... It is fascinating that, according to Luke's gospel, after Mary discovered that she would give birth to the Messiah the first person she went to, with haste, was not Joseph or her parents but her relative Elizabeth whose life was also clearly out of control. This means that the very first

church service, the first community of believers brought together by the presence of Christ, were two pregnant women.”³

Two pregnant women whose lives are quite disrupted with God showing up, yet trusting in Him, they worship. The unease, stretching, and expanding their pregnant bodies are going through serving as quite the metaphor for the unease, stretching, and expanding as they grow spiritually as they trust and worship even in disruption.

Like Mary and Elizabeth, you may be dealing with a disruption that relates to God showing up in your life. Or, you may instead be dealing with disruption related to the darkness in our world or the darkness in someone’s heart who has hurt you. Either way, whether the disruption itself is good or not good, God wants to bring good out of that disruption in your life.

Maybe, like Elizabeth and Mary, though there’s unease, stretching, and expanding, you’re growing in trust and worship of God. If you’re there, I praise God and rejoice with you. Or maybe you don’t identify so much with these godly women who have progressed to trust and worship of God even in major disruption.

Zechariah: From doubt to growing trust even in disruption (56-67) – Maybe you resonate more with Zechariah, doubting that God will show up in your life, doubting that God keeps His promises to us. Speaking of Zechariah, let’s see how he has processed the disruption of the last nine months down in verse 57. **(57-67)**

⁵⁷ When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. ⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.” ⁶¹ They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.” ⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.”

⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak,

³ http://nationalpres.org/sites/default/files/sermon_bulletins/2000.12.17.Barnes.pdf Accessed online 12/13/19.

praising God. ⁶⁵ All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him. ⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

In his doubt, Zechariah left the temple unable to speak blessing to the people who needed it. But as Zechariah has processed things in the months since, he has moved from doubt to a growing trust in God. He follows Gabriel’s instructions in naming the baby John, and now Zechariah’s mouth and heart are set free as he, like Elizabeth and Mary, praises God.

This growing trust in God even with the darkness and disruption came more slowly for Zechariah. But God kept working in Zechariah’s life, as He keeps working in our lives, and now Zechariah’s faith-filled praise blesses the people.

Next Step

The process of growing in trust in God even in darkness and disruption is not easy. This spiritual growth, like a pregnancy, includes unease, stretching, and expanding.

But like Zechariah, we are called to journey from doubt to growing trust in God, even when things are dark or disrupted. That’s our next step this morning, to journey from doubt to growing trust in God.

As you and I go on this journey from doubt to growing trust in God, like Zechariah, you’ll see things change along the way. Most of all you, as you see God showing up even in the darkness, as you experience a deepening intimacy with Him, and as you bring God’s light to the darkness in other people’s lives.

Now old Zechariah may have said nothing for nine months, but he makes up for it in the next verses, as he prophesies about his son John and about God’s Son, Jesus. In Zechariah’s prophecy, Jesus is described as the rising sun Who will come to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death.

The rising sun is a wonderful metaphor for Jesus because light disrupts darkness. And Jesus is the light Who disrupts the darkness in our lives and world. And Who will one day dispel all the darkness, forever. Light disrupts and dispels darkness.

Darkness like that of Mat, who lost his boy in war, and now has nightmares where he just weeps and weeps. On that day, God will wipe every tear from Mat and his son's eyes, as they enter a place where there will be no more wars or rumors of wars, and all the swords will be turned into plowshares, and they will know perfect peace and love with one another and with Jesus, the light Who dispels the darkness.

As we wrap up, the Worship Team is going to come up now, and we're going to sing praise to Jesus, the light.

As we worship, may God's Spirit use this time to help us journey to growing trust in God, even with whatever is going on in our lives. And if you don't yet identify as a follower of Jesus, let me know if you'd like to learn more about starting a relationship with Him.

Jesus is the only One Who can disrupt and eventually dispel all the darkness in your life, so please don't leave here without Him. Let's all stand now and if it's in your heart, let's sing praises to Jesus, and then enjoy the Christmas celebration.