INTRODUCTION: During this Advent Season, we are looking into the “Christmas Story”…

1. i.e.; the Nativity Narrative in the Gospels of Luke (ch. 1 and 2) and Matthew (ch. 2).

2. The Story of the Incarnation: the doctrine that lies at the very heart of Christianity.
   a. I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the virgin Mary. (Apostles’ Creed)
   b. God became a man in Jesus of Nazareth
   c. Incarnation: from the Latin in & carne (in flesh)
   d. A doctrine arrived at only after much disagreement in the early church

3. In 325, the Council of Nicea ruled that Jesus of Nazareth was “the same substance” (stuff) as God the Father…
   a. i.e.; divine nature in a human being
   b. Arius and his Arianism taught that Jesus was the first created being, and as such was “God’s Son.”
   c. The Nicene Creed answered that with a resounding “No!” and confessed that Jesus was “God-of-God” in human flesh.
   d. We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man. (Nicene Creed)
   e. Arianism exists today in both Mormonism and Jehovah’s Witnesses.
      i. Mormons believe Jesus is the Incarnation of Michael the Archangel and thus “a god.”
      ii. Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that Jesus is “a god.”
   f. Both views are heretical and not true Christianity.

4. In 421, the Council of Chalcedon issued a statement in creedal form that countered two other heresies:
   a. Nestorianism (the ideas of Nestorius): that Jesus had two natures and two personalities, sometimes in conflict, in His own nature.
   b. Eutychianism (from the teacher Eutychus): that Jesus’ divinity gradually swallowed up His humanity.
   c. The Council of Chalcedon professed that Jesus was and remains one divine and human person: One person with two natures, never mixed, in conflict or out of balance.
   d. We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God
and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with us according to the manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the virgin Mary, the mother of God, according to the manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us. (Chalcedonian Creed)

5. **James I. Packer: Concise Theology** (p. 105; “Incarnation”)

   a. The Incarnation, this mysterious miracle at the heart of historic Christianity, is central in the New Testament witness. That Jews should ever have come to such a belief is amazing. Eight of the nine New Testament writers, like Jesus’ original disciples, were Jews, drilled in the Jewish axiom that there is only one God and that no human is divine. They all teach, however, that Jesus is God’s Messiah, the Spirit-anointed son of David promised in the Old Testament. They all present him in a threefold role as teacher, sin-bearer, and ruler—prophet, priest, and king. And in other words, they all insist that Jesus the Messiah should be personally worshiped and trusted—which is to say that he is God no less than he is man.

   b. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. (John 1:1-3, 14, 18)

6. **Our Christmas Carols** all unabashedly proclaim this Incarnation in Jesus Christ –

   a. **Charles Wesley**: *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* (s. 2)

      Christ, by highest heav’n adored, Christ, the everlasting Lord! Late in time behold him come, offspring of the Virgin’s womb. Veiled in flesh the God-head see; hail the-incarnate Deity, pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel. (stanza 2a)

   b. An old **Latin Carol** quotes the words of the Nicene Creed (*O Come, All Ye Faithful*)

      God of God, Light of Light; lo, he abhors not the Virgin’s womb; very God, begotten, not created; O come, let us adore him. Christ the Lord. (stanza 2b)

   c. **Cecil Frances Alexander**: *Once for David’s Royal City* (s.2)

      He came down to earth from heaven who is God and Lord of all, and His shelter was a stable, and His cradle was a stall with the poor, and mean, and lowly, lived on earth our Savior holy. (stanza 2c)

7. So Dr. Luke and the tax collector Matthew – two men whose careers and skills are oriented to great detail as a physician and accountant – go into great detail in telling this story of the Incarnation.

   a. i.e.; the birth of Christ
b. As with all ancients, both Greek and Hebrew, there was the idea that great men of history were always born with miraculous events and omens attending their birth.

c. …born under celestial signs in the sky (the star of Bethlehem); attested to by ancient prophecies (like those of Malachi, Isaiah, and the texts the Magi read); infused with an aura of heavenly favor (like the songs of angels); born in obscurity (a stable, to a peasant girl) only to rise later to greatness (prophecy of Simeon), etc.…

d. …and always a son of the gods!

e. The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1)


What kind of man must this be, to whom in the end ‘every knee should bow,…and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord’? For a start, Luke tells us that so great a person is to have no ordinary birth. Mary’s virginity is an integral part of the story. If the One coming into the world is so sublime a figure, what more appropriate than that the manner of his coming should be miraculous—and that not as a matter of Luke’s poetic imagination, but (again) as a matter of fact? This, then, is the One whom we are first to know by ‘his name Jesus’ (1:31). And ‘Jesus’ means ‘The Lord is salvation’.

8. So…the evangelists build slowly but surely to the climax of Jesus’ birth, with one miraculous story after another—

a. First: An old Priest, well into his 60’s or 70’s, who with his aged and barren wife, are told by an angel that they’re going to have a son. And this boy (John) is to be the last of the Old Testament prophets, the forerunner of the Messiah, just as Malachi had foretold—

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” (Malachi 4:5-6)

b. Second: A young, teenage, peasant girl, in a little Galilean town called Nazareth, a virgin engaged to a local, young carpenter, is visited by the same angel and told that she’s going to have a son – God’s Son in her womb!

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. (Luke 1:31-33)

“I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion, 
which shall not pass away, 
and his kingdom one 
that shall not be destroyed.  (Daniel 7:13-14)

c.  **Third:** That young carpenter, crushed by the fact that his beloved fiancé is pregnant, but not by him, struggling to believe her outlandish story that the Spirit of God got her pregnant with the Messiah, receives a visit in a dream from that same busy angel. And he is told that his child will be a boy, named Jesus (Yeshua/Joshua), who will be **Immanuel** – God with us!

*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*  (Isaiah 7:14)

d.  One **miracle story** after another, pointing to the **Grand and Central Miracle** of Christianity: *God became a man!*

9.  **I**, for one, am not the least embarrassed by this focus on miracles. *Christianity is a miracle religion!*

10. **James I. Packer:** *Concise Theology; p. 58.*

a.  **Belief in the miraculous is integral to Christianity.** Theologians who discard all miracles, thus obliging themselves to deny Jesus’ incarnation and resurrection, the two supreme miracles of Scripture, should not claim to be Christians: the claim is not valid. The rejection of miracles by yesterday’s scientists sprang not from science but from the dogma of a universe of absolute uniformity that scientists brought to their scientific work. There is nothing irrational about believing that God who made the world can still intrude creatively into it. Christians should recognize that it is not faith in the biblical miracles, and in God’s ability to work miracles today should he so wish, but doubt about these things, that is unreasonable.

b.  Everything God does is **supernatural** because God is the **Supernatural Being**.

c.  Miracles are normal for God; He does them all the time.

d.  Because we are of nature (as God is above nature), His miracles are supernatural and thus mind-boggling.

e.  **So…miracles are simply God’s work in our world that seems astounding and spectacular.**

11. Miracles, **C. S. Lewis** rightly states, are God invading our natural world with His supernatural acts –

a.  Not **random** and **senseless** displays of wonder

b.  But supernatural acts of goodness with a purpose

c.  The purpose: **To point to Christ and His Saving Work**

d.  And the **Great Invasion** of God in our world is God in the flesh: **Incarnation.**

12. Zechariah has had 9 months to muse over this supernatural world of God coming to Bethlehem in his lifetime.

a.  Remember: When we last saw Zechariah, two weeks ago, He was struck dumb by an angel.

b.  **Why?** Because he refused to believe in God’s miracles!

c.  Now, 9 months later, he does…100%.
d. And the miraculous gift of his own son opens his mouth to speak of the great works of God.

13. A Psalm (poem) known as the Benedictus (Latin for the words “Blessed be…”), the firm words of this Second Christmas Carol

   a. Luke 1:56-80
   b. A poem with three parts
   c. Joy…Reverence…Change…


Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. (Luke 1:56-62)

1. Mary, after learning of her pregnancy, goes to “the hill country of Judah” (v. 39), where Zechariah and Elizabeth lived.
   a. i.e.; a town outside Jerusalem in Judea
   b. Elizabeth is her “relative” (v. 36); an aunt or cousin; perhaps a relative by marriage.
      i. To give space to her family to process her news
      ii. To give Joseph a chance to make up his mind if he would keep her or divorce her
      iii. To visit Elizabeth and “compare notes” on their miraculous conception
      iv. Perhaps none of these: At this point, perhaps no one knew except Mary, Elizabeth and Zechariah
      v. Or maybe just at the leading of the Holy Spirit, and for her own reinforcement and encouragement

2. She stays there three months – about the time Mary would begin to “show.”
   a. In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, Mary was visited by Gabriel and conceived.
   b. Three months were then spent in Judea.
   c. Mary leaves for Nazareth about the time John is born (in the 9th month)
   d. In my opinion, she returns home to Nazareth, showing her pregnancy, and tells Joseph and her family what had happened to her 3 months earlier.
   e. No one believed her; at least not yet.
   f. She had needed the visit with her older “cousin” Elizabeth to bolster her own soul for the task at hand.
3. When John is born, there is rejoicing with Elizabeth and Zechariah.
   a. Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. (Luke 1:57)
   b. They knew how to celebrate the great moments of life in those days and in that simple culture: births, circumcisions, bar mitzvah, betrothals, weddings, anniversaries, and the festivals of God.
   c. We seem to have lost most of this in our culture. Sad!
4. On the eighth day of little John’s life, it is time to be circumcised:
   a. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. (Genesis 17:12-13)
   b. Supposedly when a newborn’s blood-system is able to clot so that the child does not bleed to death
   c. A “normal” practice for Jews…
   d. …but not this time!
5. As was often the case, the community helped to name the child when there was no other choice…
   a. As in the story of Ruth –
      Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. (Ruth 4:16-17)
   b. These women appear ready to help name Elizabeth’s boy.
6. They didn’t like the name John but wanted to name this son after his father: Zechariah.
   a. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. (Luke 1:59-62)
   b. The Rabbi said, “And by what name shall this child be named?
7. Someone said, “Zack, write down the name you want; after all, you’re his father!”
   a. So Zechariah asked for a writing tablet
   b. A wax-surface pad, framed by wooded sides, and impressed upon by a wooden stylus (much like a pencil)
   c. “His name is Yohann,” wrote Zechariah, in careful obedience to the Angel Gabriel.
      And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all wondered. (Luke 1:63)
8. This act of obedience proved that Zechariah had prayed and meditated for these 9 months, and…
   a. Had come to believe the Angel Gabriel’s word,
   b. Come to accept God’s plan for his son’s life,
   c. And grown to embrace the place of his son in God’s redemptive plan.
   d. Zechariah was ready to yield his son to God!

9. When he does so, his mouth is open, his tongue is loosed, and his speech received – he *miraculously* began to talk and “bless God.”
   a. *And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him.* (Luke 1:64-66)
   b. The people sense two things; the hand of God in the recovery of Zechariah’s speech, and the hand of the Lord upon this infant boy named John.

10. A **normal** event (circumcision) impregnated with **supernatural** significance!

11. **Joel B. Green** acknowledges the miraculous flavor to this passage (*Luke*: NICNT; p. 108).

   *They obey the constraints of the covenant (circumcision on the eighth day) as well as the command of Gabriel regarding the naming of their child. Submission to God of this sort may be normal for them, but the mood of this account is anything but nonchalant. Repeatedly, this scene is bathed in the light of the miraculous – recognized already in the Lord’s expression of mercy to Elizabeth (1:58), now evident in the processes by which the child is named (1:59-63) and Zechariah regains his voice (1:64). The people’s reactions, amazement and fear (1:63, 65), are characteristic responses to the miraculous in Luke-Acts. These events also lead to pondering, “What then will this child become?” (1:66ab). And in an uncommon move, the narrator addresses the reader in a brief aside in v 66c: “For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.” This attempt at “heightening the significance of events” underscores the sense that God is at work behind and in these seemingly ordinary practices.*

12. **May I draw an application here:** Whenever we interact with God in what we consider “normal” religious rites or rituals, there is nothing normal about them. For when God shows up to these events, the supernatural begins to happen –
   a. When you baptize your children, God takes you seriously, you *dedicate* them to God, and God begins to work in their lives. **You can’t take them back; they’re never again yours but forever God’s!**
   b. When you take vows as a pastor, an elder or a deacon, God takes your ordination seriously. You’re never again “one of the guys,” but rather a “man of God”. **You can’t change your mind. You belong to God.**
   c. When you get married, your vows consecrate your marriage (and family) to God. There will forever be three in the relationship – you, your spouse, your God. **You can no more dispose of your spouse than you can divorce God. It doesn’t work that way. Ever!**
   d. So… **before you do these “normal” things – baptism, ordination, marriage, take the Lord’s Supper, etc., be certain you’re willing for God to supernaturally change you, work in your loved
ones lives, and act as if He owns you all – He does! You gave yourselves to Him, and God takes that much more seriously than most of us do.

13. Zechariah is moved, in a supernatural way, to praise God:
   a. And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying. (Luke 1:67)
   b. Thus…The Benedictus

II. THE GREAT WORKS OF GOD LEAD TO GREAT JOY (Luke 1:68-79)

   “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
   for he has visited and redeemed his people
   and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
   in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
   that we should be saved from our enemies
   and from the hand of all who hate us;
to show the mercy promised to our fathers
   and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us
   that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
   for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
   in the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:68-79)

1. Zechariah breaks into a spontaneous but inspired Psalm of praise, in 4 stanzas:
   a. **Stanza 1** praises God for the horn of salvation in Jesus:
      i. Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
         for he has visited and redeemed his people
         and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
         in the house of his servant David. (Luke 1:68-69)
      ii. i.e., a manifestation of God’s saving power
      iii. in the Messiah, the Son of David
   b. **Stanza 2** celebrates God’s fulfillment of all His prophetic promises:
i. *As he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant.* (Luke 1:70-72)

ii. Salvation from all our enemies

iii. Mercy promised to the patriarchs

iv. God’s loyalty to His Covenant

v. *And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.* (Genesis 17:7)

c. **Stanza 3** remembers the oath to Abraham – the basis for God’s covenant love and loyalty.

i. The Hebrew *chesed* (steadfast love)

ii. *The oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.* (Luke 1:73-75)

iii. *Deliverance* from enemies, fear, and sin

iv. i.e., the world, the flesh and the Devil

d. **Stanza 4** repeats the angelic message about John the Baptist

i. Zechariah prophesys what Gabriel promised.

ii. *And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.* (Luke 1:76-79)

iii. Combining Malachi 3:1, Malachi 4:2, and Isaiah 9:2

- *Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.* (Malachi 3:1)

- *But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.* (Malachi 4:2)
• The people who walked in darkness
  have seen a great light;
  those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
  on them has light shone. (Isaiah 9:2)

e. “...to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (v. 79b)

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into
contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made
glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness
  have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
  on them has light shone.

You have multiplied the nation;
  you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
  as with joy at the harvest,
  as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

For the yoke of his burden,
  and the staff for his shoulder,
  the rod of his oppressor,
  you have broken as on the day of Midian.

For every boot of the trampling warrior in battle tumult
  and every garment rolled in blood
  will be burned as fuel for the fire.

For to us a child is born,
  to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
  and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
  Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace
  there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
  to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. (Isaiah 9:1-7)

f. This would be Zechariah’s son’s message: **Peace with God!** And the Messiah’s as well…

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins. (Isaiah 40:1-2)

2. **Here is another point of application for us:** When God works in a supernatural, gracious, and redemptive way, we should do what Zechariah did…

   a. **We should** connect our little lives to God’s great plan of the ages…

   b. **We should** interpret God’s work in our lives in the context of His grand scheme of redemption for the world.

   c. **We should** link our deliverances, our salvation, and our reception of grace to the great works of God in redemptive history.

   d. **And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.** (Romans 8:28)

3. We should see our lives – including our families and children – as a marvelous part of God’s great Kingdom –

   a. **The Kingdom of God in you! And you in the Kingdom**

   b. **He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.** (Colossians 1:13-14)

   c. **Something larger than life, greater than self, and lasting forever**

   d. …that miraculously **includes you!**

4. **James Emery White** (author, past President of Gordon-Conwell Seminary in Charlotte, founder of Serious Times Ministries, and pastor of Mecklenburg Community Church in Charlotte), wrote about how he came to understand that God’s great work and his own life must be merged together.

   a. He was in college and he saw the movie, *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back.*

   b. Here’s what he wrote (Serious Times; p. 11)

   Seeing that movie long, long ago in a city far, far away at the tender age of eighteen was a defining moment for my life. I walked out of the theater profoundly moved. I remember sitting in my car in the parking lot, overwhelmed with a single thought: That’s what I want for my life: To be caught up in the sweep of history. To be in the center of things. To be making a difference. To be at the heart of the struggle between right and wrong, good and evil. I recall thinking, But where can that happen in the real world? How can I be a part of something that
is bigger than I am? Where in life can something so grand be found? Then it came to me—as startlingly sudden as a rip of lightning and as poundingly affirmed as any thunder that could follow—that’s what God’s invitation to the Christ-life is all about! There is a galactic struggle going on, and I could be a warrior. I could give my life to something that was bigger than I was, that would live on long after I was gone. What I did mattered and could impact all of history—even into eternity. The reality of the spiritual realm, the struggle for men’s and women’s souls, the cosmic consequences that were at stake—it became so clear to me—I could give my life to that!

5. That’s what Zechariah was doing – for himself, his wife, and his son. And it produced in him a great sense of joy!

6. The joy of a life surrendered to God’s Kingdom work and warfare.

III. THE GREAT WORKS OF GOD LEAD TO GREAT PERSONAL CHANGE (Luke 1:80)

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. (Luke 1:80)

1. In his Nativity Narrative, Luke includes two summary statements about both John and Jesus:
   a. He is famous for these summary statements.
   b. They are bridge verses that close out one section of his book and transition to a new section.
   c. Here are Luke’s two summary statements about John and Jesus as children.
      i. And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. (Luke 1:80)
      ii. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:40 and 52)

2. In other words, Luke is finished talking about John’s birth. In 2:1, he focuses on Jesus’ birth.

3. He won’t mention John again until 3:1ff.
   a. The adult ministries of John and Jesus
   b. Again: John first (as the forerunner)
   c. Then: Jesus Christ (as the Messiah)

4. But before he transitions to his famous Nativity passage (Luke 2:1-20) he comments on John’s developmental years:
   a. And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. (Luke 1:80)
   b. Note: Jesus’ developmental years were quite normal; life in a carpenter’s home and shop
   c. Not so with John: He grew up “in the wilderness”; apart from family, friends, social interaction.
5. Where? The barren Judean wilderness of the Jordan River Valley, west of the Dead Sea: in caves and in solitude
   
   a. **Note:** The place of his preaching and baptisms
   
   b. *During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,*

   “The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
   ‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
   make his paths straight.’  (Luke 3:2-4)

   c. *The wilderness* was the traditional home of prophets and their place of inspiration.
   
   d. God would take them “apart” from society, in order to prepare them to address society objectively.
   
6. Did John live alone as a child or youth? Probably not.

   a. Many believe he was part of a community known as the **Essenes** – a sect of Jews living in monastic type of community.
   
   b. Note: The Essenes studied the Scriptures and made copies of Scripture. They were the creators of the *Qumran Scrolls*, discovered in the 1940’s, which give us our modern Bible text.
   
   c. John was “set aside” by God for special purposes, and like little Samuel in the Old Testament, he was allowed by his parents to grow into that special calling away from them.
   
   d. *Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy clothed with a linen ephod. And his mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, “May the Lord give you children by this woman for the petition she asked of the Lord.” So then they would return to their home.*

   *Indeed the Lord visited Hannah, and she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. And the boy Samuel grew in the presence of the Lord.*  
   
7. All we know is this: As supernatural as John’s birth was, his growing up was a normal process of spiritual, social and physical maturing, experienced by others and yet unique to his calling by God.
   
8. There are lessons in this story for all of us…

**CONCLUSION:** What lessons? I would suggest at least one major lesson:

1. **Darrel L. Bock** summarizes this lesson for us *(Luke: ECNT; vol. 1; p. 196).*

   *There is one other major lesson in this unit. The maturing of pious Zechariah’s faith pictures one who struggles to accept what God has promised. Zechariah shows that even the faith of pious people can pause, and then develop added depth. It is important that the example is a man whose piety was praised at*
the start (1:6). Now Zechariah has assurance about God’s promise. He is to trust that God can deliver on His promises—which is an important lesson for the doubting. Zechariah also responds in obedience, obedience that Mary gave without hesitation. Faith for some comes slowly and for others more naturally, but in the end, the call is to emulate these saints with their notes of joy, expectation, and belief.

2. Growing in faith isn’t easy; God never said it would be so.

3. In fact, maturing in our faith is often disturbing, stretching, even painful. But God grows what He begins. *And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.* (Philippians 1:6)

4. But we can be assured (and comforted) in this process by remembering the three things we saw in this passage today:

   a. **First:** God’s work in our lives will always be accompanied by feelings of wonder, amazement, fear of the Lord, and a sense of the miraculous.
      
      i. When God breaks through and invades our world, intruding into our lives, it is often unsettling at first…
      
      ii. …and at the same time amazing: “And they all wondered…and fear came on all their neighbors” (vv. 63-64)
      
      iii. We wonder at what God is doing.
      
      iv. We fear what may come to pass.
      
      v. Yet we are amazed that God has touched our lives in a supernatural way.
      
      vi. It is both exciting and exasperating – the Romance of God in our lives.

   b. **Second:** God’s work in our lives will inevitably lead to seasons of joy, praise and celebration. The good work of God will make us happy.
      
      i. Of course, hindsight is better than foresight.
      
      ii. It is only after we see what God has been doing for us, that we relax enough to both trust God and take pleasure in His grand purpose.
      
      iii. But we will see this – in time – and we will give joyful testimony to this truth:

         *But for me it is good to be near God;  
          I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,  
          that I may tell of all your works.* (Ps. 73:28)

   c. **Third:** God’s work in our life will call us to growth, change, spiritual development that may seem difficult at times.
      
      i. But this process of growth is tailor-made for what God has in store for calling in life
      
      ii. **Illustration:** My teenage years in a monastery: lonely, painful, and confusing. But they helped prepare me for life as a pastor.
      
      iii. Never forget this powerful truth: *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* (Romans 8:28)
      
      iv. God is at work in you so that you may work for God!
5. This is the great message of **Christmas**, the message of the **Incarnation**: *God invades our world, our lives, our souls because He loves us, has some special plan for our lives, and wants to supernaturally prepare us for a life with Him and a ministry with Christ. When God comes into our lives, only good things come to pass. This we must believe...yield to...celebrate. This is the exciting side of a life with God!*