
This account of the birth of Jesus begins with some very uncertain moments. (1) Mary’s first response to the angel’s word that she had been favored is simply confusion (v. 29). (2) Then, when she learns of the impending birth, she replies, “How can this be?” (v. 34). (3) Finally, when Mary accepts her role in this divine story, the angel leaves her all by herself (v. 38). That’s a lonely situation for Mary. This is not exactly a roaring moment of confidence as calendar pages begin to turn to anno Domini, the year of the Lord.

The shock to Mary is not so much that this baby will be “the Son of the Most High” (v. 32) and the “ruler over Jacob’s house” (v. 33), whose kingdom will go on forever (v. 33). Mary’s shock (maybe even dismay) is not around who this baby is going to be, but her shock is because she does not grasp how she can even be pregnant (v. 34).

The early Church did not make a big deal of Jesus’ being born of a virgin; after all, “nothing is impossible for God” (Luke 1:37). What stunned the early Church was the fact that God would deign to come to earth as a human being, being born as all humans are born. The ancient Apostles’ Creed was stated so the emphasis was on the astonishing fact that the Word became flesh like other human beings: “born of the virgin Mary.” Born Human! The massive impact of the reality of Jesus’ humanness is captured in Hebrews 4:15: “...because we don’t have a high priest (Jesus) who can’t sympathize with our weaknesses, but instead one who was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin.” In other words, Jesus understands. Jesus understands our human situation. Jesus understands the struggle of life. Jesus understands the pressures of decisions.

Luke makes it clear that what has transpired is the work of God, the gift of the Holy Spirit (v. 35). It is a waste of time to chase after scientific explanations as to how all this happened. That’s not the point of the birth of Jesus. The point of this is captured in the title of this lesson: “God Promises a Savior.” And God delivers on God’s promises.

What Someone Else Has Said:
The late David Steinmetz (Memory and Mission, Abingdon) wrote: “On the other hand, Mary is a sign that God has really intervened in human history, really involved himself in our human clay, our suffering, our temptations...Mary as a signpost pointing away from herself to God’s mysterious activity in Jesus Christ...She is a sign pointing to Jesus Christ.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord Jesus, Your story confounds, amazes, and saves us...”


In detective movies these days, there is often some kind of listening device hidden in a room. Folks in that room carry on a conversation, unaware that others are eavesdropping. Aren’t most of us more careful about what we say, depending on who might be listening?

In today’s study lesson, Mary is certainly not very careful about what she is saying. Maybe she thinks no one is listening except her relative Elizabeth. Little did she know that what she said would be remembered and passed on until Luke recorded it for generation upon generation of believers. That’s one powerful listening device! Think about the kinds of things she is saying. They border on treason. They certainly challenge the social structure. They give preference to the marginalized.

Treasurer? She refers to “God my Savior” (v. 47). The word for “savior” is soros, precisely the terms the Roman emperors used to describe themselves.

Social structure? She speaks of upsetting the usual order of things: pulling down the powerful from their places of influence (v. 52) and leaving the wealthy with nothing (v. 53). God’s arm is more powerful than the Roman military (v. 51).

The marginalized? Mary says that hungry people will get the cream of the crop (v. 53). Those who have been walked upon by the powerful are going to be lifted to full humanity (v. 52).

Truth to tell, Mary’s statements make me nervous. Let’s face it. Most of us doing this Bible study are, more or less, in positions of safety and comfort, if not power. I like the way things are for me; surely God does not have a different value system than I do! Hmmm.

Of course, there is mercy (v. 50). Of course, there is God’s help (v. 54). Of course, there is rejoicing in God’s gift (v. 47). Even so, if I listen to everything Mary has had to say, I might need to re-examine my own principles and moral decisions. After all, God might be listening in on what I say and watching what I do. Again, I say: “That’s one powerful listening device!”

What Someone Else Has Said:
In Truth Speaks to Power (Westminster John Knox), Walter Brueggemann has said: “And then the poem (Jeremiah 22:15-16) adds a most remarkable reflection on the reality of Yahweh: ‘is this not to know me?’ The statement equates justice toward the poor with knowledge of God! It is not that justice leads to such knowledge or that such knowledge of God leads to justice. Rather the two are the same!”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “My soul doth magnify the Lord...”

December 18, 2016 Text: Luke 1:8-20 “God Promised Zecchariah a Son”

When I read this week’s study text, the first thing to jump out at me was the fact that when Zechariah got this surprising news about the son that was promised, Zechariah was having just an ordinary day at work (Luke 1:8-9). Immediately came echoes of that same theme elsewhere: the shepherds who were simply minding their own business when the angels showed up to announce Jesus’ birth (Luke 2:8). Of course, Mary was not exactly expecting to learn that she would be pregnant (Luke 1:29, 34). Jesus called Matthew when Matthew was at work, collecting taxes (Matthew 9:9). Simon Peter was working as a fisherman when Jesus called him (Luke 5:10-11).

God works in the ordinary. Magical, mystical moments are nice, but God can show up in the routines of life. I wonder if I have ever missed something God wanted to do in my day-to-day life because I failed to seek God’s work in such everyday activity.

Note that even though the angel had told Zechariah to name the child “John,” it is Elizabeth who gives the child the name “Joha” (Luke 1:59-60). This was unusual in those days; usually, the father decided what to name a child. Luke also says that the angel told Mary, not Joseph, that her baby was to be named “Jesus.” In a culture that gave women a secondary place, Luke says that God pushes back against such limitation.

“Zechariah” comes from a Hebrew name that means “Yahweh has remembered.” Boy, is that the truth! God has remembered the prayers of Elizabeth and Zechariah (v. 13). God has remembered God’s people in Israel (v. 16). God has remembered the demands of holiness (v. 5). But, God has not only remembered, God has promised a future. There will be a son born to Zechariah and Elizabeth (v. 13). That child will be filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 15). That child will turn people from disobedience to righteousness (v. 17).

It is as if God is looking back (remembering) and looking ahead (promising). No wonder that our Lord is revealed as Alpha and Omega (Revelation 22:13), the beginning and the end...the remembering and the promising.

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What Someone Else Has Said:

Adam Hamilton described John the Baptizer this way (The Way, Abingdon): "He would go to the common people and call them to repent and seek to follow God as their King. He would prepare the way for the Messiah, the promised King who would usher in God’s kingdom on earth. John believed the Messiah to be his younger cousin, Jesus."

Prayer:
As you prepare this season, let your prayer begin: “Gracious God, You already prepare a way, so help me find the right path for my tomorrow…”


Okay. Go ahead and say it. “Why does Christmas have to fall on a Sunday?”

There is this strange tension between the “rightness” of God’s people being together to worship when the Savior’s birth is recalled and the “rightness” of family joy in a shared holiday. There is some of that tension in today’s study text. After all, the shepherds are torn between staying with their sheep—as is their habit—or going off to Bethlehem to see what has happened (Luke 2:8, 15). Couldn’t it wait? No—they said, “Let’s go right now” (Luke 2:15).

These verses are so familiar that it is difficult to find anything terribly new here. Maybe that is the good news! What we have heard before is still true! What God’s people have celebrated for twenty centuries is still true in 2016!

In the midst of all the amazement (v. 18) and celebration (v. 20), there is Mary. Translators struggle to capture her feelings in the midst of all this. “Quietly treasured all these things in her heart” (Living Letters)…“turned them over in her mind” (J. B. Phillips)…“kept all these things” (American Standard)…“mused upon it” (Moffatt)…“gave much thought to them” (Basic English)…“committed these things to memory and considered them carefully” (Common English). “pondered them in her heart” (King James)…“often dwelling on it in her mind” (Weymouth)…“kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself” (Message)…“in her careful, watchful heart she weighed these secret things” (Bede).

I wonder if Mary and Joseph told Jesus about the circumstances of his birth: the angel visitation, the journey to Bethlehem, the birth in an unfamiliar place, visits from rough shepherds, and, later, visits from well-cultured astrologers. Do you suppose Mary kept a souvenir piece of straw from the feeding trough in which she placed the infant Jesus? Do you think Joseph told Jesus about the time they had to run for their lives to Egypt and what happened to those babies left behind in Bethlehem?

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John have differing ways of telling the Christmas story. There is too much richness for just one telling. Maybe Luke summarizes it all when he says, “Everything happened as they had been told” (Luke 2:20).

What Someone Else Has Said:

Adam Hamilton (Half Truths, Abingdon) wrote: “But Christians believe that in Jesus, God came to us, walked among us, showed us, and taught us who God is and who we are meant to be.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel…”