



CHRISTMAS PRESENCE
SERIES GUIDE

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HIS PRESENCE IS
THE ULTIMATE
PRESENT

11 . 30 — 12 . 28



Christmas Presence Series Guide

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Introduction:

Welcome to the Christmas Presence Series Guide. Whether you are moving along with us live or catching up in a small group, we want to make sure that you have all the resources that you could possibly need to not only understand these texts, but to ultimately understand our Savior a bit better. We believe, as scripture says in **2 Timothy 3:16-17, New International Version (NIV): 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**

If all scripture comes from God, through the revelation of God and through inspired pens of the ancient writers, then we should be deeply familiar with what it has to say to us. The beauty of scripture is that it is ever renewing to us, and ever new to the reader who reads it for the first time. Unfortunately, too many of us “think” we know the scripture, but have never really studied it for ourselves. Through this series guide, you will encounter scripture, much of which you are familiar with, but in bite-sized pieces each day that will allow you to ingest it at a pace that is reasonable, intentional, and thoughtful.

Each part of the series guide is divided into weeks that coincide with the preaching of the scripture from the Crosswalk worship experience each week. We suggest that the best way to use this material is to simply follow along each day, journal if you can, and come to church (or online) prepared with the series guide to take notes and to broaden your understanding of each week’s preaching portion.

Thanks for joining us on this journey, we hope it is a blessing to you and your family.

WEEK 01

Day 1-7

Planning the Presence

Luke 1:6-25 | Romans 12:8-10

“You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice with you at his birth,” Luke 1:14 NLT
It all starts with a baby... not that baby

WEEK 02

Day 8-14

Shipping the Presence

Luke 1:26-45 | John 3:28-30

“The light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.” Luke 1:78-79 NIV
In the swirl of Christmas we can miss what the story is all about

WEEK 03

Day 15-21

Early Presence

Luke 1:57-66 | Romans 8:28

We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.
Romans 8:28 NLT
God provides, though it's not always exactly like we'd like Him to

WEEK 04

Day 22-28

Unwrapping the Presence

Luke 2:1-19 | Philippians 4:6-9

“He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!” Luke 2:32 NLT
What are your God-birthed hopes and dreams?

WEEK 05

Day 29-35

Regifting the Presence

Luke 2:22-38 | Matthew 10:29-32

She talked about Jesus to everyone who had been waiting for the promised King to come and deliver Jerusalem. Luke 2:38 NLT
When THE story becomes your story

6 Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God’s eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord’s commandments and regulations. 7 They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old.

You have to love it when you jump into a conversation that is already happening. We are doing that here, just a bit. However, we are talking about Zechariah, a priest from the division of Abijah. (Israel had 24 priestly divisions that would serve in the temple, 3 times a year—Pentecost, Passover, and the Feast of Tabernacles—and all 24 divisions would serve at the temple.) So Zechariah was at least a part-time priest and served diligently. Elizabeth, his wife, is introduced in v.5 as well, but not much is said of her except that she was from the line of Aaron.

V.6 Begins with us knowing they were both righteous in the sight of God. It is probably important to note that Luke likes to say that they were righteous in God’s sight, not just on the outside, like some of the Pharisees we encounter in scripture. How were they righteous? They “observed all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly.” However, there was an issue; they were childless. Apparently it was seen as the fault of Elizabeth and her inability to bear a child. Now, they were old, and not just old, VERY old.

Perhaps a little more on righteousness. The language used here is a bit Old Testament, (i.e., laws and commands. . .)

but righteousness for a Christian also includes keeping the commandments of God. However, the difference is that we keep the commandments out of love that God has for us, rather than so we can acquire God’s love for us. Our keeping of God’s laws will always be in response to His great love for us! We should never shy away from the law and commands of Jesus, for they are ultimately the most life-giving way that we can live our lives. However, to think that keeping a law makes God love you more is tantamount to heresy. God can’t love us more than He does. Our following His decrees comes from our overwhelming response to His relentless love for us.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous, and they kept God’s laws even though life had not given them what they wanted the most, a child. Sometimes, being faithful in the midst of disappointment is what we are called to be. Remember, sometimes God saves us OUT of things; sometimes he saves us IN things, but he always saves us FOR something. Elizabeth and Zechariah, at this point, were still in their barrenness, but yet, they remained faithful.

1 – Have you ever had to remain faithful even though things were not working out? Write out that narrative. How did it work out?

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2 – Do you still believe that God can create miracles in our lives? Have you ever experienced a miracle? What was it? Tell the story in detail.

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8 One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week. 9 As was the custom of the priests, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. 10 While the incense was being burned, a great crowd stood outside, praying.

Perhaps some context here is important, because the text is talking about the priestly duties, and there seems to be an assumption that we know what those duties are (See Exodus 30:7-8). Remember, there could be as many as 18,000 priests serving at the temple, so it was always the center of Jewish cultural and religious life. Also, Luke begins the story in the temple and ends his gospel in the temple as well. He also begins Acts with the temple. He is wanting us to understand how important the temple was to them.

Because there were so many priests, Zechariah being chosen by chance for this particular time must have been a work of divine providence. God was up to something, and He needed to speak with Zechariah alone. What better place to do it than the temple where God resided? It was convenient, and it was God-ordained.

Sometimes in our lives, God has the prerogative to create appointments

for us in our calendars. If you have ever had a divine appointment, you know what I mean. A divine appointment is one where God is going to speak to you, either through someone, through circumstances, or with a voice directly. This was such a time as that for Zechariah.

It is good to note that there were a great deal of people around the temple, and they were praying. The reason it is important is that what Zechariah had been asked to do was very public and very important to the traditions of the time. To be chosen was an honor and was directed by God. So we come into this narrative understanding that something outstanding is about to take place.

This sets up the context for the following conversation. This conversation will change the course of so many people's lives, so we need to lean in close to hear the words that God has for Zechariah.

1 — Have you ever had a divine appointment that was clearly placed there by God? What was it, and how did it work out?

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2 — Do you keep an eye open for when God places you right where you need to be? Sometimes God has been placing you in the same place over and over again until you recognize that there is a reason God has placed you there.

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11 While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. 12 Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him. 13 But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John."

Zechariah had a "divine epiphany." That means that there was a revealing, either from God in the form of a messenger, or God himself. It is almost a scene right out of the book of revelation with the angel standing to the right of the incense altar. It makes sense that his reaction is one of fear and shaking! We would probably respond to that as well. Just a quick note: The fact that the angel was standing on the right side of the altar means that this visit was not ominous, but it was for favor and blessing.

In v.13, the first words out of the angel's mouth are "Do not be afraid. . ." which is a pretty standard greeting for angels in scripture (Luke 1:30; 2:10; 8:50). You see, when we come in contact with the divinity of heaven, we recognize that not only are we not worthy to be in its presence, but we are actually in danger of being consumed by such a presence. Have you ever come in contact with someone who was so much better than you at something that all you can feel is inferior, even if that is the last thing they would want you to feel? I remember watching Wayne Gretzky play ice hockey back in the 1990's, and it seemed as if he was playing a completely different game than everyone else on the ice. He

was amazing, yet incredibly gracious. I can only imagine how other players felt when they were skating against him. So it is with us when we come in contact with the divinity of heaven.

Then we see the angel say that "his prayers had been heard. . ." Which prayers is the angel referring to? It must not have been the prayers that he was praying for Israel in the temple; it must have been the prayers of a would-be father, who for years had been praying for a child. However, I would bet those prayers had ceased quite a while ago, as there was no medical science that could help his wife's condition at the time.

Now, the name for their child was given at the time as well. His name was to be John, which means "Yahweh has been gracious," but for some reason, the significance of the name was never really explained. The name was not given for its etymology; rather, it seems it was noted for 2 reasons: 1) It was not a family name, therefore would have been out of character for someone like Zechariah to name his son this name. 2) Luke wants us to know that God was in control of this situation from beginning to end. It seems to be important for Luke that we know the origin story of John the Baptist, as well as Jesus.

1 — How would you feel if you were visited by an angel of the Lord? Would you react like Zechariah, shaken and overwhelmed with fear?

Dotted lines for writing response to question 1.

2 — Is there anywhere in scripture when a human comes in contact with the divine, either through an angel or with God himself, when their reaction was anything but fear? Why is that?

Dotted lines for writing response to question 2.

14 You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. 16 And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. 17 He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly."

Joy and Delight! We always have joy and delight when a new baby is born, so this statement seems obvious. However, don't forget about the eschatological joy that would come from John as he prepares the way of the Lord. This is the arrival of the precursor to the kingdom of God. The messianic age begins with John making a way in the wilderness.

The angel then goes on to explain that because John has been set aside, he must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. (This is in line with the family consecrating John to be a Nazarite. If you remember Samson, he was considered a Nazarite as well. They don't drink, cut their hair, or become ritually unclean by touching a corpse, even those of a family member. (Numbers 6:2-5; Judges 13:4-5; 1 Samuel 1:11)

As well, the angel mentions that he will be filled with the Holy Spirit and have the spirit and power of Elijah (See 1 Kings 16-18 for a refresher on Elijah). Both of these comments are a very big deal! Could you imagine if you were

told that your child is destined for great things? Most parents feel this way when they hear they are with child, but to have this be affirmed through divine appointment and the actual words of the angel! That would be powerful stuff, and I supposed it would be hard not to become arrogant after hearing this. In fact, many people would probably be incredulous about the veracity of all of this. How could you be sure that the angel was telling the truth?

Another point seems relevant: the call that was placed on John's life was declared "from birth." The reason this is important is that most prophets were called later in life, while some were called while in the womb still (Samson, Judges 16:17; Jeremiah, Jeremiah 1:5; Servant of the Lord, Isaiah 49:5; Paul, Gal 1:15). This means that there is biblical precedent, and of course, Zechariah should have known this. However, I think we can all agree that this was a big ask for a man and a woman who had been barren into their older years.

Lastly, there is an interesting phrase at the end having to do with the hearts of the fathers turning to their children. Some say this is a chiasmic structure (a particular way of Hebrew writing, using parallels); some think it has to do with restoring families together. But there is

absolutely some sort of parallel having to do with families being restored, and the unrighteous (disobedient) being restored as well. Whatever the exact meaning, one thing can be made clear; John has a big job ahead of him.

1 — Have you ever had such a big job ahead of you that you almost don't want to get started?

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2 — Have you felt the call of God in your life? Do you believe that you have been set aside for something amazing? Something that might change the world? If so, you have probably never told anyone. Take the time right now to write down what you believe you have been called by God to do that no one else on the planet has your specific gifts to make happen.

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3 — To be sure, the calling of God comes with responsibilities. What will you need to give up, or take on, in order to fulfill God's calling on your life?

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18 Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years." 19 Then the angel said, "I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was he who sent me to bring you this good news! 20 But now, since you didn't believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time."

Needless to say, Zechariah was incredulous. He had a hard time believing that what the angel said was true. Any of us would probably feel the same way! In his language there seems to be an implied sense that he would need some sort of sign to prove that was true. (Of course, his wife becoming pregnant would have been a pretty good sign, but he needed more, something immediate).

This clearly frustrated the angel, who identified himself as "Gabriel, who stands in the very presence of God." Wow! God not only sent an angel, but he sent THE angel, Gabriel! However, it is important to note that if an angel tells you something, you should probably believe it; because as Zechariah was questioning him, the angel was more than willing to

give him a sign. This sign, would be that Zechariah would become silent and not be able to speak until the birth of the child! (By the way, did you know that Gabriel is really one of the only angels who has been given a name that we know? See Daniel 8:16; 9:21ff)

The other thing that should be noted is that getting a prayer answered is not always what it is cracked up to be. What is meant by that is simply this: We all want God to speak to us, but when He does, it usually throws our lives into chaos; we want our prayers to be answered, but when they are, there is usually a great responsibility that goes with it. While it seems that hearing from God is great, I think that sometimes hearing from God is going to mess with your life a great deal more than you bargained for!

1 – When have you had a prayer answered and it became more than you bargained for?

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2 – Have you ever heard the voice of God asking you for something? Did you accept it, or were you incredulous like Zechariah?

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3 – How can you become more in tune with the voice of God in your life? Does worship help prepare you to hear His word?

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4 – Has there been a time when you denied hearing the voice, although you knew you were hearing it?

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21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah to come out of the sanctuary, wondering why he was taking so long. 22 When he finally did come out, he couldn't speak to them. Then they realized from his gestures and his silence that he must have seen a vision in the sanctuary. 23 When Zechariah's week of service in the Temple was over, he returned home. 24 Soon afterward his wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and went into seclusion for five months. 25 "How kind the Lord is!" she exclaimed. "He has taken away my disgrace of having no children."

At this point, the people would have been concerned that Zechariah's priestly duties were taking so long. Remember, this was a very ritualized culture, and his duties would have been specific, and everyone would have probably known how long they take. While he is having a conversation with the angel, the people were waiting and wondering. As he finally came out, he couldn't speak. The assumption was that he must have seen a vision from or of God while he was inside. This, to be sure, was very exciting for everyone. However, it was difficult to communicate what was prophesied for him and his wife. Once he went home, after a week's service, she became pregnant.

Obviously, Elizabeth was very excited, and you can see it in her exclamation of how kind the Lord is to give them a child. At the time, infertility was not understood as it is understood today. There would have been a pretty significant stigma indicating they were living under the curse of God for not being able to have a

child. The Bible always presents fertility as a gift from God. Pregnancies occur as God "remembers" a woman and blesses her with a child. In the Old Testament story of Abraham, Sarah claims that "Yahweh has prevented me from bearing children" (Gen 16:2).

Children are always a gift from God, but that does not mean that barrenness means you are under the curse of God in any way. We know this now, but back in the first century and before, the understanding was very different. Therefore, when we see a couple without a child in the Old and New Testaments, it is not without the social concerns they would have felt, as well as the emotional strain of feeling as if you were cursed by God.

Some of us live with that feeling of being under the curse of God. Regardless that scripture continually, especially in the New Testament, gives witness to how good God is toward His people, some of us still feel that God is not for us. However, if you take a look a little forward in the book of Luke, you will see that Je-

sus declares the "year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:19). Now, Jesus is reading from the scroll (book) of Isaiah, but he is saying that God is for you and not against you.

No matter what you are going through, you cannot be under the curse of God in any way, shape or form. This is not how God works, and there is no way

that He would want you to understand His love for you as being anything less than perfect and wanting what is absolutely best for you. Please don't ever assume that God is not for you, He is! It has been reiterated again and again throughout scripture, and it has probably been reiterated in your life again and again as well!

1 – Have you ever felt under the curse of God?

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2 – How did you get away from that feeling of being cursed?

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3 – Do you know how much God loves you? And do you know where you can go in scripture to have that verified again and again? (Suggestion; simply do a google search of "Scripture texts about God's love," and you will find all the answers you need!)

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As you know, on these days, we don't exegete the text; we study the questions that have come from the text and how they apply to our lives. While this week, we have received a great deal of context for the coming of John the Baptist (a name given to him much later), we have also learned a few other things:

- 1— Sometimes, getting the answer to our prayer means our lives change so profoundly it is hard to believe.
- 2— God can call us to something great!
- 3— You, in no way, can be under the curse of God!

But of course, this is not all that we have learned. We continue to learn that the coming of Jesus is considered "good news" and in these texts we see that John is going to be the precursor of this good news. Why is the gospel considered "Good News"? While that seems like a simple question to answer, it is often met with so many requirements that we seem burdened by it, rather than being freed by it.

live under the "burden" of the Gospel? Of course not! He makes a way clear in the wilderness, he prepares the "Way of the Lord" in order for us to be freed from the burden of sin, and to carry the gift of righteousness that comes from God as well. How is it possible that we get these things confused? How is it we find a way to put things into the gospel that might make it less than good news? Why would we do that? Perhaps it is because of a few different reasons:

Why is that? Was John meant to clear a path to Jesus so that we have to

1— We like to be in control. The gospel cannot be controlled by human beings. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus came and died for everyone, whether we like them or not, whether we agree with them or not, and whether we want them to be saved or not.

2— We like to feel safe. And while it would seem that the gospel is the safest place for us to be, it seems that we feel much safer when there is a checklist that we can tick off to know where we stand. Fortunately, this is not how the gospel works. Relationships will always be more complex than a checklist. However, they are also more life-giving, dynamic, and important to us.

3— We like to take credit. However, there is nothing in the gospel for which we can take credit. And we learn this even in the story that we discussed for this week. God has a plan, and he has planned to be present in our lives in a very real way. His presence was considered, planned, and prepared for us. Through the story of

the birth of John, we see how God uses multiple people in multiple ways in order to make his providential plan become a reality. He was even able to use the old and doubting Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth.

If you are studying in a small group and listening to the sermon, here are some things that might be helpful in order to begin a discussion:

- 1— Why did Jesus need a precursor?
- 2— What was the role that John was to play?
- 3— Do you think there was significance to having an older couple be the parents of John?
- 4— Why was it important that he be raised a Nazirite?
- 5— Find out more about the Nazirite calling in the Old and New Testament.
- 6— How can you understand the calling that God has on your life?
- 7— Have you known your calling from an early age? Is it something that is new to you in your older years?
- 8— What does it mean to "prepare the way of the Lord?" What was John supposed to do?
- 9— How does this part of the story set up the next part of the story?
- 10— How can we "prepare the way of the Lord" in our own context? Be specific when you answer this question.

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26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, 27 to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. 28 Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you.”

Now we are getting into texts that we are very familiar with! The story of the angel visiting Mary is not only popular, but has been immortalized in so many movies, books, pageants and plays, that it seems like you know it by heart. Of course, it is a fulfillment of prophecy and it is a clear call of God to this young woman to bring into the world the Messiah; but it is also the story of a young couple struggling with social pressures of society, and trying to do right by God, even in the face of becoming social outcasts because of what they are called to do and called to be.

While there is a simplicity to this story, it is really extraordinary in the aspect that God did not go to someone who had all the skills to handle this kind

of request; rather, he went to the most vulnerable in order to create the right environment for Jesus to show up. It’s pretty phenomenal that when God calls someone, he also calls their loved-ones, their community, and even their spouses to take part in that calling. This is a tall order, and it was a tall order back when we enter into these texts, as well.

Elizabeth had come out of her sequester, which wasn’t a customary thing, just so you know. She was back, and this is how we are keeping the time context happening in the story. At this point, the angel again appeared, this time to Mary. Of course, you know how the conversation goes from here on out. It’s pretty simple. But Gabriel begins it with an important thought:

“Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!”

The Greek word for “favored” is one that really means that favor has been bestowed upon Mary. It wasn’t so much that Mary was worthy, but that she had been chosen for the blessing that was coming. Today, we might use the idea that Mary had been “graced” with the presence of God, not only with her, but within her. (This is where we get that phrase “Hail Mary, Full of Grace. . .” in the Catholic vernacular).

So let me ask you this question today: Do you feel that you are favored by

God? What would that look like in your life? To be favored by God is not only that God considers you, but that He has a job for you to do for Him. Chances are that being favored by God means that your life will take twists and turns that you could not have imagined would be part of your experience. The chaos that seems to ensue once God has decided to favor you just might make you think twice about how much you want to be favored!

1 – What would it mean for you to be favored by God?

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2 – What are you willing to do for God when His presence shows up in your life?

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3 – Is there anything that he can ask that is just too much for you to take on?

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4 – Has there been a time when you know that God is favoring you? What was that like?

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29 Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. 30 "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

As per usual, Mary was confused and pretty upset or disturbed. One of the reasons that Mary was disturbed was probably not just that a man would rarely greet a woman, but that an angel would greet a woman as well. Rarely, if ever, did we see an angel speak to a woman, so this was out of character, and it was out of custom. So she begins to ponder what any of this could mean. How was she favored? How might this begin to change her life? What was on the horizon for her?

And what is on the horizon for you? What does God have in store for you? As we read this, and realize that in the moment, Mary was confused and a little scared about what was coming next, and we live in that place as well. Sometimes, we know God has something for us, but we just don't know what it is. We are confused, we are a bit scared, and we even find it easier to just put it out of our minds.

Mary couldn't do this, because the angel is right there, in the middle of the conversation, so her time to contemplate what he was saying was short. The angel stops her reverie by simply saying a phrase that angels seem to have to say

all the time; "Don't be afraid." This parallels v.13, the normal reaction to seeing an angel is fear and confusion. It would probably be the same for us as well.

Now the angel becomes directive; Mary will give birth to a baby boy and she will call him Jesus. As well, he tells Mary that the child will be GREAT! And this greatness is held in contrast with the rest of the human race. We are not great in the same respect that Jesus was. In fact, even John was great, but in a different way. While John's greatness is an opener for Jesus, the greatness of Jesus is the main event!

Luke is beginning to talk about five things that Jesus is. 1) He will be great! 2) Jesus will be called the Son of the Most High. This is a fancy way of saying that people will call him the son of God. 3) God will give him the throne of David. (This is an allusion to 2 Samuel 7:12-13 and the fact that Jesus is the prophesied messiah. 4) He will reign over the house of Jacob, again, referring to him as the messiah. And 5) His kingdom will never end! This means that the work of the cross is forever and ever. There is power in each of these five statements!

1 — How do you think you would react to an angel visiting you? Be specific!

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2 — Do you ever wonder what God has in store for you? How can you be patient in the waiting?

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3 — Mary was asked to do a huge thing for God; do you think God will ask a big thing of you?

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4 — Do those five things mentioned above give you some peace that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the prophecies in the OT? As well, does it give you peace that this work will continue on forever?

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34 Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin!"

The literal translation of this is "since I have known no man." Could it be that the angel was talking about how she, at a later date, would have relations with her husband and that would be the messiah? The fact that the angel doesn't mention Joseph or their betrothal doesn't seem to make that so. What is important to understand is that boys and girls were often betrothed to one another when they were quite young, like 12 and 13 years old. They would even move in together, but they would not consummate the marriage until much later. This was pretty standard at the time.

So this statement by Mary was appropriate. But because Jesus was to be greater than John the Baptist, his conception and birth must be greater as well. While John's inception and subsequent birth were certainly a miracle, they were nothing of the scale that we see in the conception and birth of Jesus to a virgin girl.

Now, here is where it has gotten a little weird at times. A few early church fathers tried to make these comments of Mary's to mean that she would be a perpetual virgin from then on out. However, this does not seem to make any sense. The gospels seem to assume that Joseph

and Mary had a normal relationship, and had other children after Jesus. (Matthew 1:25) Remember, the most important part of this story is not the virgin birth, but the incarnation of Jesus. In other words, it is not the "how" of this story, but the "what" that is most important.¹

To focus on the "how" means that we might have a preoccupation with the process of the birth of Jesus. Much has been written about the mechanics of this miracle. As it is extraordinary, it would make sense that we could become enamored by trying to figure out how this all works. However, to do that would be to diminish the miracle itself. The fact that God became man is a true enough miracle; the how is secondary in nature. While the next text mentions the Holy Spirit, that is all that is mentioned.

Have you ever become so excited about how something works that you forget why it works in the first place? Not all of us are engineer types, but some of us love process over outcome. In this narrative, try to focus on the incarnation rather than the inception or conception. Sometimes, there are questions that when left unanswered, only heighten the importance of what happened.

1 – Is this part of the story something that you have ever pondered?

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2 – Why do you think some people get so focused on how this conception happened? Is it curiosity? Is it just the nature of some people? If you are studying in a group, ask this question around the group and see if people are focused on different aspects of the story as the most interesting.

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3 – How can we remain focused on the "what," rather than the "how"?

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1 – Stein, R. H. (1992). Luke (Vol. 24, p. 85). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.



35 The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. 36 What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. 37 For the word of God will never fail.

There are a lot of things happening in the text today, so let's jump right in!

In response to Mary's question (see yesterday's thoughts) the angel let Mary know how this will happen. It seems innocuous, and it is also some of the same language that is used when John was spoken of earlier in this chapter (Luke 1:15). However, Jesus was conceived by the Spirit, and therefore he will be greater than John. As well, there is mention of being "overshadowed" by the Holy Spirit. This is essentially a parallelism with the previous sentence. Luke would often refer to the Spirit's influence as "power."

So here is a question for today: can you think of a time when the power of the Holy Spirit has been upon you? This may not be the way that we talk too often. However, we do believe that the Holy Spirit is active in our lives; so let's ask this again: has there been a time when you have sensed the Holy Spirit's influence in your life? This does not have to be miraculous; it can be in worship, in nature, in conversation as he leads you to the right words. We often want the miraculous, when the

practical implications of his influence can be just as much a blessing and a miracle as something that seems larger.

Then the text speaks to the holiness of Jesus that will come through this. Remember, John the revelator speaks of the pre-existence of Jesus (See John 1:1-3), but Luke never mentions this theological tenant. That does not mean that Luke does not believe in the pre-existence of Jesus, just that he was not thinking about it as he was writing this text (as Jesus obviously did believe in it. John 1:1-18). Jesus is holy regardless of the mechanism of conception.

Calling Jesus the "son of God" is a recognition of the messianic work that Jesus would do. (Acts 9:20-21). The term "son of David" was often used as well (Romans 1:3-4), but this ups the ante a bit. There is a connection to the very specific name of Jesus as God's own son. Again, this brings us to an understanding that Jesus is not like John the Baptist in all ways. While both conceptions are miraculous, Jesus is greater in all things.

The last part of this text is bringing us back to the story of Elizabeth. Mary

must have been thrilled to hear that Elizabeth was with child as well!

But the last phrase is important. The NLT translates this as: "For the word of God will never fail." However, you have probably heard it in this way: "For nothing will be (is) impossible with (for)

God." What a strong affirmation of not only that which precedes this statement, but also of the narrative of Jesus' life to come. At some point in our lives of faith, we have to believe that God can do the impossible, does it often, and might even do it in our lives.

1 – When was God willing to do the impossible for you?

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2 – Has God been faithful to you in working toward what is best for you and most abundant in your life?

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3 – Have there been times when you have assumed that God was no longer watching out for you, only to realize that he had been there all along?

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4 – What does this story tell us about the nature of Christ?

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38 Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her.

Mary responded wisely, powerfully, and with full submission to the will of God in this situation. Her answer always reminds us of the narrative of Isaiah in Isaiah 6:8, **"Here am I, send me. . ."** As well, Samuel answered the call of God in this way (1 Samuel 1:18) and even Jesus was willing to submit to the will of God for his life and future (Mark 14:36; Matthew 26:42; Luke 22:42; John 18:11). The champions of scripture had one thing in common: they were willing to submit to God's plan and God's providence in their lives.

Are you willing to submit to God's will for your life? This is a question that is worth asking every single day. It is more than simply the desire to know His will; it is the full recognition that His will in your life might throw your life into chaos, it might change the course of your life, and it might actually ruin your plans for your life. It is a huge ask of God.

We sometimes think these words from those in scripture who have been asked the impossible seem to make them of great faith, and perhaps that is true. But God asks for our whole lives, each day, and that takes great faith as well. Don't think that what God is asking of you is anything less than spectacular and inclusive of all that you are!

All of those champions of scripture, those who followed God to places they were not sure they wanted to go, had one thing in common; a willingness to let God take control of their lives. To give themselves over to a life that was unclear at times, unsafe at times, and ultimately, not what they had planned for themselves. This is such a hard thing to do. Mary, in all her youth, recognized this moment as one where she could say no, or simply lean into the direction that God would send her. She chose the latter. Do we?

1 – How can we resubmit to the will of God each day? (See Galatians 2:20)

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2 – Do you think Mary did this because she was confronted by the angel? Or do you think she would have submitted to God's will for her regardless of how she was asked?

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3 – Are you waiting for the word from an angel, or does God speak of His will for your life in other ways each day?

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39 A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town 40 where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. 41 At the sound of Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, “God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. 43 Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? 44 When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. 45 You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said!”

It is hard to speak of the preceding texts and not recognize the “Magnificat: Mary’s song of praise” that comes directly after it. Please include this in your reading (Luke 1:46-56) for today. However, we are focusing on the interchange between Mary and Elizabeth, and more importantly, between John and Jesus.

We should know this story well. Mary, having finished the conversation with the angel, left to go and see Elizabeth. Some have suggested that this is because she didn’t want anyone in her town to know she was pregnant, but that is not supported in scripture. Rather, it seems that what Luke was trying to tell us is that she is the model believer and is eagerly responding to her new circumstances that are directed by God.

When she enters the house, John leaped inside of Elizabeth. Anyone who has had a child knows the excitement, and sometimes the discomfort, of a baby moving inside of a pregnant mother. However, this was not just a movement,

but a jump instigated by joy at John being in the proximity of Jesus. In this way, the baby John is already taking up the call to “prepare the way” for Jesus. He is announcing to his mother that Jesus was now in the house.

Is it possible for us to “jump for joy” when we think of Jesus and announce His kingdom to others?

Elizabeth explains what happened to Mary, and for good measure, asks why she is so honored to have Mary visit with her. Both of these women are truly blessed, recognize it, and now are realizing that what they are a part of is nothing short of miraculous and world-changing.

Do we think of our lives in the Kingdom of God as world-changing? Do we think of the call that God has on our lives as something that can affect significant change? It must have been a strange and wonderful recognition that Mary and Elizabeth had with one another, knowing they were part of God’s greater narrative of salvation for the world. However, why

would we think the call of God on our lives is any less life-changing for those who hear the gospel and experience God’s grace through us? While we, of course, will not be saviors, we can connect people to THE Savior, and in that way, we are called to be little John the Baptist, preparing the way of the Lord for those under our influence.

1 – Have you thought of your call to Gospel ministry as this important? It is!

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2 – How can you “prepare the way of the Lord” for those in your life?

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3 – What kingdom work is God giving you today? What can you do this hour? Here are some suggestions: Write and email a message of encouragement, text someone that you and God love them today, smile to someone who needs it, be particularly gracious as you drive to/from work today, ask God to open your eyes to the needs around you.

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Luke 1:26-45 continues the narrative and focus on Mary's call to be the mother of Jesus. It is easy to see that Mary, while confronted with an extraordinary circumstance, could have been frightened and confused (and indeed did go through some of those emotions), but rather decided to forge ahead in faith. Her song, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), is a powerful response to what she had been called to do in

this situation. Sometimes, we forget to praise God for His call on our lives. It is so easy for us to see His call as a burden rather than an opportunity to affect real change in someone's life or in the world. Mary wasn't interested in saying no to God; rather, she wanted to be at the center of the kingdom of God, and this proved true through her whole life.

Mary's interaction with the angel is an interesting model for us as we come in contact with God in our lives. It seemed to take at least four stages:

1— Fear and Confusion. Why wouldn't there be? Of course this is confusing when we are asked to do something that makes us uncomfortable, especially if the thing that we are asked to do is only able to be accomplished by the power of God. It makes sense that we wouldn't understand. That confusion leads us to ask questions.

2— Questions. Perhaps it is our incredulous nature, but we ask questions of the divine, not to be disrespectful, but to receive clarity on what is being asked of us. **God is not afraid of our questions.** However, sometimes he reminds us that he has this all in hand, and we end up with the answer, but also with a reminder of who is in charge (See Zechariah's inability to talk for nine months!) This is not punishment as much as it is a reminder that God has this handled! Remember, when the ask from God is so big that only He can make it happen is when things get really exciting. This is when faith really kicks in and becomes real in our lives!

3— Submission. This is our willingness to let God be God and let our lives conform to the will that He is expressing for us. It is not easy, it is not simple, but it is what God is asking from us. It becomes our life's work, this willingness to submit to God. And it is WORK. It is never easy letting go of control. Have you ever taught someone to drive? It is frightening, it is dangerous, and it is absolutely the right thing to do! This is much like letting go and allowing God to be the one who drives our lives. God does not force us into this, but rather, asks us to come along on His journey rather than forging one for ourselves.

4— Praise and Joy. This is always the outcome, even in the worst of circumstances. The circumstances don't determine how we feel about what is happening in our lives through God. This is why Paul says he can rejoice in his sufferings (See Colossians 2:4-15). It is not the fact that we suffer, but the fact that we are becoming effective for the kingdom of God and for the purposes that God has for us that makes us joyful and want to praise Him. Our worth is not determined by our circumstances, but by our willingness to allow God to use us.

If you are studying in a small group and listening to the sermon, here are some things that might be helpful in order to begin a discussion:

- 1 — What strikes you as most important in these texts for this week?
- 2 — Have you ever tried to put yourself in Mary's place? What would you think about what was asked of you?
- 3 — The story of the virgin birth is one that many people have a hard time with. Do you? What is difficult to believe about this narrative?
- 4 — Can God do miracles? If so, are there limitations to those miracles?
- 5 — Do miracles create any other problems?
- 6 — Why would God choose this method of incarnation and not something else?
- 7 — What does the Magnificat do to your spirit as you read it?
- 8 — How can we live in this same sort of joyful praise of and to God?
- 9 — What is the hardest thing God has ever asked of you?
- 10— Did you do it? How did you feel as God accomplished His work in you?

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57 When it was time for Elizabeth’s baby to be born, she gave birth to a son. 58 And when her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had been very merciful to her, everyone rejoiced with her.

This seems pretty simple and direct. Coming off of the Magnificat and those previous verses, it hardly seems that we should stop here and consider these texts. However, in the few words that we have to study is an important principle that we should all consider. It comes in the last 4 words: “. . . everyone rejoiced with her.”

This is a recognition that when the community heard that there was a successful birth, her community was full of joy and they rejoiced with her. Community is incredibly important, and one of the reasons that we congregate together each week is so that we might become a community of belonging. A community that rejoices with one another, that cries with one another, that suffers with one another, and a community that recognizes that the thing that binds us all together is a recognition of the grace that God has given to us all.

Remember, we were told that many would rejoice at John’s birth (See Luke 1:14). So this was a fulfillment of prophecy in that the community was rejoicing with the parents. As well, it is pretty outstanding that a couple of such age would have a healthy and happy child. Of course this was a miracle, and joy has a tendency to accompany the extraordinary work of God in the lives of those whom He chooses to bless.

Are we a community that rejoices together? Too many communities find joy in the tearing down of one another, in the gossip, in the exclusion. This is not the type of community that expresses to the world who God really is. Our communities can choose to be the brightest of all lights in our world, or we can choose to love those baser things, those things that drag one another down. We need to continually make the choice to move to the highest levels of community, of grace, and of compassion. We can do this, and we can do this together if we have great communication, if we continually submit to the joy that is following Christ, and if we continue to keep the call of God fresh in our hearts with one another.

A healthy community doesn’t cannibalize itself. That means, we seek to bring support, joy, love, and peace to everyone involved. That is hard, as communities are complex organisms. However, when we begin to believe the gossip and let it fester, when we allow negativity to become the soup of the day, and when we forget to want the best for each other, our communities can become deeply broken and very hard places to find joy.

In these four words, we see that a good community rejoices when something goes well for one of us. Let us be a community of belonging that rejoices with one another.

1 – Have you been guilty of gossiping and of wishing for less than the best for someone in your community? How can you walk that back?

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2 – How do you find joy in your community? Are you connected the way you should be? Are you just visiting when you go to church, or are you participating in the life of the community?

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3 – How can you become more connected to what is happening in your faith community? Can you connect to a ministry that will help you become more involved in what God is doing through the community?

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59 When the baby was eight days old, they all came for the circumcision ceremony. They wanted to name him Zechariah, after his father. 60 But Elizabeth said, "No! His name is John!"

So what is happening here? This is the culmination of the religious tradition that the Jews would have adhered to. On the eighth day, a male child is circumcised by a priest. As Zechariah is a priest, he certainly would have adhered to this tradition. So as they were doing what would have been expected, they did something unexpected; they named the baby a name that was not of their family origin. This was unusual. Almost always, they would have named their son "bar", which means "son of", and this time they did not. Elizabeth called out, "No, his name is John!" This was done according to prophecy and scripture.

This shows a willingness on the part of Elizabeth to follow through on what God has called her to do, regardless of the cultural understanding, the

social expectations, or the friendships that might be broken when you do something so unexpected that it might make people feel uncomfortable being your friend. Sometimes we have to follow through regardless of what other people think.

Has that ever happened in your life? Have you ever done something that is so out of character for you and for your culture people are actually somewhat offended? Going against the grain of society is something that Christians are often called to do, but it is hard. Of course, we are called to be counter-culture, but that also means we are called to be part of the change that culture needs. If we are not engaged in the culture to which we belong, we lose our voice, and our differences are missed as we are no longer players on the stage of culture.

1 – What do you do when God asks you to do something that is so out of character, you will be seen as a revolutionary or a rebel? Do you continue on? How can you do all of this with wisdom?

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2 – When Elizabeth called out "No, his name is John," why was that so revolutionary? While we don't know much about Elizabeth, does she seem like a rebel to you?

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3 – How can you be a revolutionary for the kingdom in your context? What would it take?

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61 “What?” they exclaimed. “There is no one in all your family by that name.”

In Biblical times, a parent sometimes chose a baby’s name from circumstances associated with the conception (as in the case of Isaac) or the delivery (as with Jacob and Benjamin), sometimes from Divine acts or attributes (all those including as prefix or suffix “el,” “eh,” “ya,” and “yahu”), and sometimes from nature (for example, Deborah, meaning bee, and Jonah, which means dove).²

So names mattered a great deal in biblical times. But names still mean a great deal today. When we were naming our three children, we went through thousands of names trying to find the ones that would connect with our family history, with what we thought our children’s personalities might be, and with what is culturally appropriate. (For instance, I have known kids named “Plastic Plastic” and that probably wouldn’t work for my kid in Southern California today!)

What does your name mean? Does it encapsulate your understanding of who you are and who God is? Many cultures have names that mean certain things. For Elizabeth to name her son John would have had to have been a divine appointment, and it surely was.

Regardless of what anyone thought, Elizabeth was going to follow through on what the Lord had asked her to do.

Can you imagine the thrill of never having had the ability to have a child, and then to be blessed by God with a son? And not only a son, but a son with a purpose, and a world-changing purpose at that! This must have been a powerful moment for Zechariah and Elizabeth. I am sure they wanted everything to be exactly right through the whole process.

It is important to note that while there was no one in the family who was named “John,” it was still a name that had significant meaning. The name John, as mentioned earlier in this guide, is “Yahweh has been gracious.” This statement, that comes in the form of a name, could encapsulate the whole of the gospel. God was gracious in giving Zechariah and Elizabeth a son, gracious in allowing Mary to mother His son, gracious in the gift of salvation that comes from the work Jesus did on the cross, and gracious that we can participate through the action of baptism and witness in this great work that is from God.

1 — What does your name mean? Have you ever looked it up? Does it match with your personality?

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2 — What are you going to name your child? And what is the thinking behind it?

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3 — How can you acknowledge that God has been gracious to you today? Make it tangible!

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² — <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/a-historical-view-of-choosing-a-name/>

62 So they used gestures to ask the baby’s father what he wanted to name him. 63 He motioned for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s surprise he wrote, “His name is John.”

No one was sure that Elizabeth could make this pronouncement that his name should be called John. So they did what any patriarchal society would do, and they checked with the man. Did you forget that at this point Zechariah was still unable to speak? Zechariah was still dealing with the effects of second guessing the Angel.

The NLT translation says that everyone was surprised that Zechariah said the name John. The reason for this is that Zechariah was both deaf and dumb. That means that he would not have heard Elizabeth telling them to call him John. So the name had been confirmed from two sources (Zechariah, Elizabeth), and they were independent of each other. This, of course, is another in this long line of miracles leading up to the birth and naming of John.

We have spent a few days on this, and the reason is that it was more unusual than we usually think about. The

naming of John tells us that both Elizabeth and Zechariah were “all in” for what God had for them through their son. His future was confirmed, it had a purpose, and they were excited to see it come to fruition.

You see, this is how God works. God is always at work with His people, and so something that seems like an instantaneous miracle is really the end result of God working through many different avenues in order to make something happen just the way that you need it. God is constantly engaged in matrix math, the kind of math that is three dimensional, in order to work toward the good in all things for those who believe. But it is not in isolation. It is a long obedience of many people in order for the miracles to take place. This is the brilliance of God; the work He does is always in partnership with those who are willing to go against the grain of culture for Him.

1 – Has God been working in your life for a miracle in someone else’s life?

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2 – How has God used you or others in the past? What sort of effect did it have on your life?

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3 – Are you aware of the way God is working in the lives of others in order to bless you? What can you do to become more cognizant of how God is working?

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64 Instantly Zechariah could speak again, and he began praising God.

What happens when you actually follow the will of God in your life? Do things change instantly? While it seems there was an instant change in Zechariah, this is something that God had been working on for a long time. Remember, Zechariah was a priest, worked in the temple, and was a spiritual leader in the community. While God healed him in an instant, it was a long nine months that he had been silent.

Have you ever liked a band before they have become famous? Some of us love to be the kind of person that finds a band before other people do, before they become "commercial" and before the money inevitably ruins the music. But when they do become famous, for most people, they seem like an overnight success.

I was talking to a friend of mine in the band Switchfoot. This was around the time that their "Learning to Breathe" album was just starting to pick up momentum. I think that their distributor had loaned them a bus for

their tour, something like that! I was affirming their success and telling him how cool it was. He reminded me that he had lived on people's couches and in vans and busses for the last 20 years. He said something to the effect of "overnight sensations take decades to arrive!" I have never forgotten that conversation. And I think it applies to this text as well.

Zechariah was instantly healed, yet it was not instant. It was the outcome of a long obedience in the right direction. This is something that we can all look forward to when we decide that we will commit to what God is asking of us, every day. It is not a one-time choice; it is a choice that we make every single day. We want that breakthrough in our spiritual lives, we want that healing, even physically, but these are things that don't just happen overnight. They happen with the continual presence of God in our lives, and our continued obedience to Him as well.

1 – What kind of work has God been doing in the background of your life?

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2 – Do you ever feel like a breakthrough might be coming? How do you lean into that?

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3 – What can you do to recognize the background work that God is doing in your life and partner with Him?

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65 Awe fell upon the whole neighborhood, and the news of what had happened spread throughout the Judean hills. 66 Everyone who heard about it reflected on these events and asked, "What will this child turn out to be?" For the hand of the Lord was surely upon him in a special way.

These texts show us the very human response the community had when all of these things occurred. Awe is a cool thing. It usually happens after the first response of fear abates and we are left to actually think about the things that have just happened. God has been moving in powerful ways, and the recognition of this is palpable in the community. When a group of people recognize that God is moving, revival usually happens pretty soon after!

There are a few interesting things happening in these texts. Did you notice they did not say, "Who" will this child turn out to be? Rather, they said "What." This means that they recognize that God has a purpose and a plan, in fact, a calling for the life of John! Communities are usually pretty good at recognizing the call on someone's life. Sometimes, the community will recognize this before the person will.

This community began to speak about the things that God was doing in the life of this family, and recognized that John had a specific and important calling and responsibility for his life. It is frightening to think that he had to grow up know-

ing that not only was he a miracle, but that he was a miracle with a purpose, to introduce the world to another and even greater miracle.

How do you live with such a responsibility? It might seem like it is unreasonable, but then again, God often asks for unreasonable things from us. And then he makes those things reasonable!

Another important point is that we see a group of people who decided that rather than gossip, they would spend their time talking about what God was actively doing in front of them. This is always a good move! When we find ourselves with nothing to talk about, we usually go negative rather than going to a positive place. If we could simply fill the contents of our conversations with the work of God in our lives, everyone would be lifted up in a much more powerful way!

Lastly, the Greek word means that they were discussing this back and forth, and it doesn't seem to have an end. When we recognize what God is doing, there is no end to the conversation!

1 – How can you fill your conversations with what God is doing for you and in you?

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2 – Do you have other people in your community that are receptive to this kind of conversation?

Dotted lines for writing.

3 – Do you know the purpose that God had in saving you? What is your call? And has the community confirmed that call in your life?

Dotted lines for writing.

We are talking about the story of John's birth and his naming. This story is often glossed over in order to get to the powerful story of Jesus being born. However, there is so much in this text to consider. Just because the miracle of John's conception and birth is less spectacular than the story of Jesus does not mean there is not a great deal of important pieces that should be taken into account. It is certainly the lesser of the miracles, but it is a miracle nonetheless, and as such, should be important to us.

We see a few things happening; 1) Zechariah and Elizabeth continue their commitment to the call that God has placed on their lives and the life of their unborn son. 2) In the face of criticism and confusion, they still forged ahead. 3) The community recognizes something is happening they should consider, and they recognize that it is from God.

With these things in mind, we are asked to consider the following: 1) what commitment to God's call really is; 2) how it is recognized in the community; 3) and what it can do to a person, a family, and a community. The call of God will always make an impact in the imme-

diately community, and perhaps beyond as well. But it will not be an isolated thing. The reason for this is that God always makes His presence and purpose known in a community, and usually in a powerful way. And this was no less true when we consider the story of John. His Mother and Father were first affected (which, of course, affected him), and then the community was impacted through the experience of birthing and naming John. While God did not speak directly to them, they were directly affected and their minds were changed about ideas about how God works because of both Zechariah and Elizabeth remaining true to their experiences with God. It is a ripple effect.

When God moves in your life, it will ultimately have an effect on the kingdom of God. Your little decisions have that same ripple effect as the decisions of those in the scriptures who were called by God. This story is such an example. From a personal response to the call of God, to the communal recognition that God is doing something amazing, we see how the call of God and faithfulness to that call create a momentum for the kingdom of God.

Here are some questions to go along with this week's sermon:

- 1 - What has God called you to do, no matter how small, that has created some ripple effects?
2 - What were those effects? How did they present themselves into the community?
3 - Has the commitment you have seen in Zechariah and Elizabeth inspired you? How so?
4 - In the story, there were consequences for not believing the angel, or at least questioning the angel. Have you ever suffered any consequences for not believing that God could do what He says?
5 - How has God been creating momentum in your life around the things He has asked of you?
6 - God is always preparing, even when we can't see. This week, we asked if you knew where God might be working behind-the-scenes. We will ask that question again, and if you know, might you spend some time thinking about where He might show up again in your life?
7 - How can you be committed to following through on the things that God is asking of you?
8 - What is the biggest ask God has ever made of your life?
9 - What is the smallest ask God has ever made of your life?
10 - Which one do you think grew to the largest impact to those around you?

A series of horizontal dotted lines provided for writing answers to the questions.

Notes

Lined writing area for notes on the left page.

Notes

Lined writing area for notes on the right page.



1 At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. 2 (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census.

We are setting the stage for the birth of Jesus. Of course, we are familiar with this story in so many ways. Sometimes, it almost seems boring to go over this story again. The three wisemen, the shepherds, the manger; it all seems very overdone. But a question we must ask is if there are any differences between what we understand the story to be, and what those in the first century context may have felt about the story? Have the millions of retellings, the thousands of years, and the different cultural contexts changed the very nature of the story? And is it possible to get back to that earlier, more contextual understanding of this story? It is so easy to take what popular culture has made the story into and count it as truth. This week, we will take a new look at a very old and important story, and see if we can imbue new meaning and understanding into it.

We begin as we are accustomed, talking about the census. But there are a few things that should be considered for a stronger contextual understanding. It has long been assumed that Joseph and Mary showed up in Bethlehem just in time for her to give birth. Of course, there was no room at the inn, and so they were given a space with the animals. However,

these comments seem strange when we really understand the culture they were coming from. Firstly, we should consider that Joseph was of the "royal" bloodline. He was a descendant of King David. And while we often call Jerusalem the "City of David," in the first century, they would have spoken of the City of David as being Bethlehem. So when Joseph would have shown up in the town, he would have been recognized as a descendant of David and many doors probably would have been opened up to him.

Secondly, every culture has a soft place in its heart for a woman who is pregnant. For them not to be able to find a place to lay her head would have been strange. Was there no sense of honor in Bethlehem? This would have been seen as a shame. As well, Mary had relatives nearby (Zechariah and Elizabeth, specifically), and they would have been able to make the few mile trek to their family's house. We often think that they arrived and Mary had the baby that same night. However, there is no account for that in scripture, so where did we get this idea?

The source of this comes from about 200 years after the birth of Jesus. There was a Christian who wove an expanded account of the birth that survived and is called "the Portevangelium of James." Of

course, James had nothing to do with it. There are details in this writing that are full of imagination, but not much fact. We don't have time to prompt you with the details; however, there are a bunch of crazy things that happen. We have some of our narrative stemming from the details put into this story.

We will continue to ask some questions about our understanding of the narrative and give some answers to help us understand what is really happening in this story and in the biblical account we are studying.

1 – How familiar are you with the story of the Birth of Jesus? Where did that understanding come from?

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2 – How can you read this story with new eyes, with new ears, and with a new understanding?

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3 – How does learning that our traditional understanding of the details of the story might be a little confused make you feel? Often, when we come into contact with new or more true details of something we have always assumed, we become a bit anxious. Stay with this study to understand even more of this story in its appropriate context.

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4 And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David’s ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. 5 He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child. 6 And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. 7 She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

So, we know that “Swaddling Clothes” are something that children are still wrapped in in certain villages in Syria and Palestine. But when it comes to understanding what the manger is and what an Inn would be considered in the first century, we need to inspect things a bit more. For our western, 20th-century minds, these words evoke the idea of a stable or a barn in which the Holy family would have been housed. Simple village homes in Palestine often had but two rooms. One was for guests, exclusively. That room would have been attached to the end of the house. The main room would have been considered the “family” room where the entire family cooked, slept, ate, and lived. The end of that room would have had a step, and each night, they would have brought the family cow, donkey and even a few sheep into the front part of the room.

This would have been a pretty standard house in 1st century Palestine. The implication here is that Mary and Joseph would have been welcomed into someone’s home, but would have been living in the section where the animals were.

The mangers were often hewn out of the ground, and filled with straw. These sections were lower due to the animal waste, and the runoff, so they could clean those areas a little more easily. Each day, the family would take the animals out of their homes and tie them up outside.

So how did we get to use the term “Inn” from all of this? Actually, this comes from a misunderstanding of the words for “commercial Inn” versus “guest room.” As there is a great deal of Greek language involved here, we won’t spend the time on it. (See Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes, page 32, for a more detailed explanation.) But the misunderstanding and our twenty-first century context makes us think that the Holiday Inn in Bethlehem just didn’t have any beds available. These misconceptions have shaped so much of our thinking, our context, and our understanding of the Holy Family and their experience in Bethlehem.

Here is a question: Would understanding these details a little differently change the way you think about this story? That is one of the things we have to take into account when we really study

scripture as a discipline and try to be true to the text, rather than our traditional understanding of the text. Sometimes, not much changes, just details. But other times, we can find a much deeper understanding of the text by being honest

about what it says. These details in this story don’t change much of our understanding, but does give it context and a better grasp on the culture where Jesus showed up!

1 – How does a greater understanding of the context of scripture help your understanding of the greater principles of the text?

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2 – Is there a change in your understanding of this text? Do you like those who live in Bethlehem a little more now?

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3 – What is a text in scripture that you have never understood and you would like to study more?

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8 That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. 9 Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, 10 but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. 11 The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! 12 And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

Ah, the shepherds. Traditionally, shepherds were labeled as unclean. They were often lowly, uneducated types. Could there be meaning to the fact that the angels showed up to the shepherds first? What was God trying to tell the world? Is it about accessibility? Was it about how Jesus came to save the lowly first?

When they heard, they may have been afraid for a couple of reasons; 1) it was an angel. And we know what happens when people meet angels! 2) They may have been afraid because they were asked to visit the baby, and they might have assumed that they would be rejected because of their status. How could shepherds be convinced to expect a welcome from the family of the newly born messiah?

Over the years, ministries I have been involved with have worked with the underserved and homeless population a great deal. There is often this same sort of understanding that the homeless have when they come to a church. They don't think they will be accepted as they

are. We feed them without a "sermon" or "call" that they have to listen to, and they are often surprised. We believe that a community of belonging does not have strings attached to becoming a part of it. And sometimes, they can't believe they are being asked in. The shepherds might have felt much the same.

When the angel said that they were to find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, they would have immediately recognized that this was a baby born to peasants, not to royalty, as this is how they would have wrapped up their children as well. They must have found the family in an acceptable state of accommodations, because even a shepherd would have brought them home if they were staying somewhere that was not worthy of their newly born baby.

The Middle Eastern culture has an incredible capacity for hospitality. We learn this early on in Scripture (Genesis 18) with the story of Abraham and his guests. This culture continues to the present. When I was growing up in Israel through the summers, we would

often be invited to an antiques dealer's home when my father was purchasing items from them. This was pretty standard, as hospitality requires this from the Middle Eastern culture.

What we see clearly here is Jesus was born for the most lowly and underserved around us. All have access to his

grace and mercy, all have access to his heart and compassion. Our salvation does not depend on our status, but on his. And thank goodness for that! We are blessed to call Jesus Savior, and this story lets us know that there is grace available to all.

1 – Have you ever felt that because of your social status, you might not have access to all the things that others do?

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2 – How does this telling remind us that Christ is for all people?

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3 – Can you think of a job that reminds you of shepherding, and how we might look at those who do those jobs? Is there a lesson we can learn from this story?

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13 Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”

This might be my favorite part of the story. The shepherds were already nervous at being spoken to by an angel, and about being asked to go visit the messiah. But then, all “heaven” breaks loose through the angel calling up his “armies” and having to see them praise God! I don’t know what picture you have in your head of all of this, but to me, it goes from quiet night in the field, by the caves, to one angel coming and whispering in the dark, to the whole of the sky being lit up by the grace of heaven and the armies of heaven singing as loud as you can imagine!

I have a decibel meter on my watch, and it often tells me when things are getting a little loud around me. It happens in church every week. But it also happens if my dog barks, or if the TV is on a little loud, or if someone honks at me on the road. I think about this, and then I think about the sheer volume that would happen if all those angels were singing the same song, at the same time, and with the same amount of fervor that one sings the “hallelujah chorus” on those church choral programs.

I love what they sing as well, “Glory to God in the Highest!” This is definitely one of the first praise songs ever written! These angels had a first-hand knowledge of God, and they were able to sing of the God that they KNEW to be amazing! I think that is true of the songs that we sing as well. When we have experienced the goodness and power of God, our songs take a different tone in our lives. We sing with reckless abandon because we know that no matter how loud, or well, or poorly we sing, we won’t be able to do Jesus justice with our words and our songs.

If this is what the angels knew as well, that must have been a loud night outside of Bethlehem. I wonder if even the rocks were crying out as well that evening?

And the words that they sang were parallel lines: From the highest of the heavens to the earth, From God to Men (If that makes sense). What this means is that in descending order (Heaven-Earth) (God-Man) there is to be praise of Jesus. And this praise is not simply to those who have God’s favor, but all now have God’s favor because of His Son!

1 – How have you praised God today?

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2 – Have you ever been surprised by the power of your praise?

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3 – Have you ever been changed by praise of God?

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4 – Do you ever feel God’s favor in your life? What does that look like?

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15 When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

16 They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. 17 After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. 18 All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished.

Angels leave. Seems to be their very nature. They are messengers, stewards, and reflectors of the Most High, but they don't stay around too long. The question always remains with us; "What will we do?" The shepherds had to ask themselves the same question. They were curious enough to overcome their fear of their low status, of their confusion at what the angel said, and to leave their sheep. They hurried, or ran, to the village and found the family. What they saw was a baby, lying in a manger. This completed the loop that was left by the angelic prophecy, and they were astonished.

If you read further in the gospels, you will see that this reaction the shepherds had to Jesus was the first in a long line of people who were consistently astonished, amazed, in awe, and even fearful when they meet Jesus. Why would this be? Perhaps it is because Jesus was unlike anything before Him or after Him. He was completely unique in his presence, purpose, and posture. You see, the trouble with Jesus, all throughout His life and ministry, was that people

expected one thing, but often received another. They were looking for a messiah, but they received God. They were looking for something they could understand, but they found the inexplicable. Jesus has always been this way. When you think you have figured Him out, He is so much more, so much deeper, so many more layers, that you have to begin again in your understanding.

Did you also notice what happened once they had met Jesus? They went to tell the world about what had taken place. This is a natural response to meeting Jesus, and having Jesus meet you. There is a quickening that happens in our hearts, so that we might be able to have the energy and the right spirit to tell everyone what we have seen. This excitement comes from understanding that we have been in the presence of the Most High God. It seems the angels understood this, at least in their hearts, and then went to spread the word.

What is your witness to Jesus? When you met Him for the first time, were you moved? Were you excited? Did you tell anyone about what He has done for

you? Sometimes, because we either met Him when we were young, or because we haven't become reacquainted with who He really is, we assume either that others around us have already met Him, or that our story is not that compelling. However, we need to remember that

our story is as compelling as His story, because when we give witness, we are not giving witness to ourselves; rather, we give witness to God and what He has done for us, through Jesus. So our story is as compelling as His story is. And that is history!

1 – What is the story of salvation that you are telling those who are under your influence? Do they know what Jesus has done for you?

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2 – How can you continue to spread the love of Jesus regardless of your status, position, or title? Do you think anyone will listen? (We are sure that they will!)

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3 – The shepherds "hurried" when the angel had left. Do you hurry to go and see Jesus when the opportunity reveals itself?

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19 But Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. 20 The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

There are some who think that Mary did not understand what had just happened; therefore, she needed to think about it for a while. (Some translations use the phrase; she "treasured up these things and pondered. . .")

Anyone who has had a child understands that there is a mix of emotions that accompany having a new baby. There is confusion, there is exhaustion, there is excitement. All of these are bundled up in the newness of life, the newness of the change you are going through as parents, and in the fear of having to take care of this new life! It wouldn't be uncharacteristic of a new mother to want to spend some time thinking about these things. It is not unreasonable to be confused at the shepherds' reaction to her new son. So much had happened since the angel showed himself to her many months before. It is time to be reflective, to ponder, and to ask the questions of your heart. What could this all mean? What does it mean to be the mother of the Most High God? What will life hold for her in the future? What will His life be like?

We all have hopes and dreams for our children, but how do you even fathom what life will be like for a child like this?

Could she have been afraid that her parenting style might mess up the Son of God? That may sound a little silly, but there could be some truth to this. Mary, like any other mother, would not want to make a mess of a child that had been entrusted to her by God. Could she have pondered what it would be like to have a child who had all the power of heaven? What are the practical implications of this? Interestingly, from what we have in the Biblical record, his life was relatively normal, and he was a pretty well-adjusted kid, except that he seemed to be an expert in the law by the time he was 12 years old (see Luke 2:41-52)

What do you ponder when you come into contact with Jesus? Do you ever take the time to reflect on what He means to your life, to your family and to your career? Do you make decisions based on this understanding of who God is in Jesus? How can the knowledge of who Jesus is be a constant informative addition to your thought processes? Is this too much to ask of you?

1 – How does a knowledge of Jesus affect your life each day?

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2 – Did you notice that the shepherds went back to what they do every day and every night, but with a completely different attitude? One of praise and worship of God! Do you enter into your work this way each day because of your knowledge of Jesus? How could you do that?

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3 – When was the last time you pondered the happenings of Jesus at the early part of His life? Would it be appropriate to do that now?

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This week we have been studying the events immediately before the birth of Jesus and immediately after. We have discussed what an Inn really was, how the houses were built, how the hospitality of those in Bethlehem might have played out, and the change we experienced in the Shepherds as they discovered who Jesus was. It is a powerful story that leads us to the continued reflection we will take on in this last week of the series.

It is always positive to ponder. Reflection is really important in our spiritual lives. It matures us, gives us a thought process that is reasonable, and it slows down our decision making process, allowing God to work through the Holy Spirit on our thoughts and dreams. It also allows us to integrate Jesus into our decision-making process. Some people do it through prayer, some through meditation, and some through simply taking the time to reflect. Regardless of what word you put to work in thinking of Jesus, we must engage in this. Even Mary did when the child had been born and visited by the Shepherds. If she needed a moment, we probably do as well.

This story is one that we have heard so many times it is simply easy for us to read over it, and not even have it register.

We know the story fulfills prophecy time and time again, but those are almost taken for granted in the grand scheme of things. Perhaps the time is ripe that we give this story more than just a cursory reading. Before the sermon this week, we suggest you go back and read these texts a few more times, in preparation for the sermon, the understanding, and the call that will be made to action from these texts.

There seems to be three reactions that come from those in the narrative: **1) Astonishment. 2) Reflection. 3) Praise and Worship (Joy).** These three things happen again and again. We are confronted with who Jesus really is, and that puts us on our heels. Then, we have to spend a little time wrapping our heads around what has just happened, its real meaning, and the impact it will have on our lives and in the universe. Then, after that reflection, we recognize the incredible power and blessing that Jesus is, and that changes us to give us lives of praise, worship, and thanksgiving, all coming from a place of pure and unadulterated Joy!

Here are some questions to go along with this week’s sermon:

- 1 — Do you remember hearing this story for the first time? While this story is ubiquitous around Christmas, do you think of it often even when it is not the season?
- 2 — How do you react when you recognize the real turmoil and uncertainty that Mary would have had to live with, not only when she was having the child, but before and after as well?
- 3 — Are you a parent? Can you tell us about the reflection you had when your child was first born? Can you remember the feelings you had? Where they positive or negative? Fear and awe?
- 4 — How did you prepare yourself for the birth of your child. We are not asking about the physical preparation, but how did you prepare yourself mentally, emotionally, and spiritually to be a parent? Can you imagine the preparation that Mary went through?
- 5 — How can we prepare people to meet Jesus through this Christmas season?
- 6 — How can we be like the shepherds, returning to their same jobs, but with everything being different?
- 7 — What role does worshiping God play in your everyday life?
- 8 — Do you live your life with a sense of joy and gratitude for what Jesus did when He came to earth as a child?
- 9 — Would you be willing to parent Jesus?
- 10— How would you discipline your child, if he were also God? (Maybe a silly question, but a reality if you were a parent)

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21 Eight days later, when the baby was circumcised, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel even before he was conceived. 22 Then it was time for their purification offering, as required by the law of Moses after the birth of a child; so his parents took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. 23 The law of the Lord says, "If a woman's first child is a boy, he must be dedicated to the Lord."

As was the custom, and as was paralleled in the story of John, Jesus was circumcised on the 8th day, and his name was called Jesus. This name, again like John's, was given by God through the angel. As well, there must be a dedication. Zechariah was able to do this, as a priest, but Mary and Joseph had to go to the temple. All of this shows a solidarity with the Jewish people and tradition from whence Jesus came. This is important in acknowledging that Jesus came from a particular time and to a particular people and tradition. Those things are not bad, nor are they to be vilified. We have to recognize where we come from if we are to have any understanding of where God wants to take us.

It says, "when it was time for their purification offering. . ." this would have happened 40 days after the birth of Jesus (seven days after birth, circumcision, 33 days after this, purification -Leviticus 12:3-4) They then took Jesus "up" to Jerusalem, because Jerusalem is always "UP" from wherever you live. The reason they went was to present Jesus to God, and to dedicate Him to the work of the Lord.

The weight of these words; "as it is written. . ." is important. The tense of this verb is called an "intensive perfect." What that indicates is that it was written in the past, but still holds value and importance. In other words, this was commanded back in the OT but it still has binding value for the Jews in the first century. You may wonder if it still holds value today?

That is a great and enduring question. The answer is that the principle behind the tradition does hold value. In other words, we still dedicate our children to God. Obviously, we don't do it in the temple, as that no longer exists. We don't do it as a tradition from the Jewish faith tradition; rather, we do it in order to remind ourselves that our children are not our own, they are God's first and foremost, and in community we recognize this and ask for God's blessing and watch over our children. It is not demanded, but it is something that we do in remembrance of Jesus and His care over our lives.

1 – Were you dedicated as a child to God? What did this mean to your family?

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2 – Did you dedicate your child? Where and when? Were you reminded that this is a choice before God to give your child in His service?

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3 – Did the community recognize their role in helping a child grow in the way of the Lord?

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24 So they offered the sacrifice required in the law of the Lord—"either a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

Why spend a whole day talking about a specific sacrifice? Does that seem like overkill? Perhaps it is, but we actually need to spend a few moments talking about the importance of the sacrificial system and how it relates to the story of Jesus.

First, these specific instructions come from Lev. 12:8. But here we learn a few things; 1) Mary and Joseph were not rich. They could not afford a lamb, to be purchased from the temple, so they were able to give the lessor of the sacrifices. These could be purchased in the temple, and therefore there was a closed system of commerce that was available to them. (Perhaps this is why Jesus turned over the tables in the temple. It might not have been because there was commerce happening, but because that system of commerce was closed, it was usurious, and it was taking advantage of those who came with little.)

The sacrificial system was put in place as a way to reconnect people with their God and to help people understand that God is a priority (first fruits of what you make), the importance of sacrifice (the lamb or birds), and a way to help the priests (Clergy Class) make a living with their focus remaining on God. This system had worked and created a spe-

cific identity for the Children of Israel over thousands of years. Now, however, we begin to see that God has something else in mind. With the advent of Jesus, the sacrificial system is put on notice that there is a sacrifice that actually takes care of everyone who believes. It moves from policy to people, from sacrifice to salvation, from lambs to the Lamb of God.

While Joseph and Mary were assenting to the tradition from which they came, they would have had a hard time understanding that the one they had dedicated to the Lord would be the same one that ultimately made those sacrifices worthless in the eyes of God. Once the Son had been sacrificed, and once he had risen from the grave, there was no more need for ritual sacrifice, as we now live in the grace and love of Jesus, the ultimate sacrifice for our sin. The sacrifice that would never need to be redone, as it was forever.

The sacrificial system could not be sustained without a temple, without the temple economics, and without the focus. Jesus brought the focus away from tradition and into living truth. He replaced the sacrificial system with becoming the sacrifice for us, eternally. And for that, we should be eternally grateful.

1 — Have you ever felt that you were sacrificing a great deal for something in your life?

Dotted lines for writing response to question 1.

2 — How would you have felt about sacrificing an animal as part of your weekly ritual of faith?

Dotted lines for writing response to question 2.

3 — How has the sacrifice of Jesus made you into a different person? How do you deal with having to sacrifice in your life?

Dotted lines for writing response to question 3.

25 At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him 26 and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.

We don’t really have any idea who Simeon was. The author only uses him for this story, and we never hear of him again. Only the role that he played in this story is his claim to fame. Nevertheless, it seems that he was someone who was desperately waiting to see the Messiah. He was righteous and devout, which is pretty common of a delineation for Luke, as he loved to use pairs when he was writing about someone.

He was waiting for the Messiah to come and be the “consolation” of Israel. The language here suggests that he was not specifically waiting for Israel to be saved; rather, he was waiting for the Messiah who would enter in the Messianic age, and with that Israel would be saved. This is perhaps why he was satisfied when he saw the baby Jesus. You see, Jesus brought salvation to Israel, but he never took them out of the Rule of the Romans. Much to the consternation of many, the role Jesus would play was

salvific, not political. It wasn’t that Jesus was a revolutionary that bothered people; it’s that they couldn’t figure out what kind of revolution he was starting. While we now understand that the coming of the kingdom was not political, they would have expected something else.

However, Simeon seemed not to worry so much about this, as he was happy to see the one who would be the beginning of the messianic age. When he saw Jesus, he understood this was the beginning of something, and he would never see the end of this messianic age. But he didn’t need to see the end. Sometimes, the beginning is enough.

As he has been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he saw the Messiah, he must have waited with bated breath every day in order to see the one whom had been promised. This life of expectancy would have been both exciting and exhausting. However, we will see that things worked out well for him. . .

1 – Do you live your life with expectancy?

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2 – What are you waiting to see? Has the Holy Spirit told you what you should be waiting to see in your life?

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3 – Sometimes we are called to wait in life. Have you ever felt that calling?

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27 That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, 28 Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying. . .

As Simeon was one to whom the Holy Spirit was familiar, when he was led by the Spirit, he followed. This day must have been an important one. This old man would have felt a quickening in his spirit as the Holy Spirit invigorated old bones to go, once again, to the temple. Perhaps this day would be different. Perhaps this day would be the day! Simeon went to the temple, and a young couple was there, ready to dedicate their baby boy to God. When Simeon saw this, he seemed to be moved in the spirit and he took up the baby.

We stop there today, to give you a sense of expectancy for what Simeon will say. However, there are a few things to notice; 1) Simeon knew the voice of the Holy Spirit in his life. Do you? If the Holy Spirit talks to you, are you ready to move? Could you even recognize it? Simeon seemed to have a pretty particular relationship with the Holy Spirit. How can we

know someone's voice if we have never heard it before?

So the question becomes, Are you listening to the Holy Spirit in your life? And if not, how are you going to recognize it when you are ready to do his bidding? Will you go when he tells you to go? Will you move when he tells you to move? Without a familiarity with his voice and presence, we will miss it when it does come in earnest.

Simeon must have had quite a few years to perfect this skill. We have some of that same time as well. This is a practice of listening, and perhaps not talking so much. Sometimes it is in the silence that we hear God more specifically. How can we find time for that silence in our lives? Is there a way that you can organize your life to include some silence and reflection? In this way, you can listen for the Lord.

1 – Can you find time in your life for silence and listening for the voice of God? Be specific about when and where you want to do this.

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2 – What would you do if you knew that you wouldn't die until you saw Jesus?

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3 – Have you ever heard the voice of God? When and how did you hear it?

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29 "Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised. 30 I have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared for all people. 32 He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!"

The term Sovereign Lord makes sense because we use the term servant in the latter part of the verse. Unfortunately, the word "now" made it into the sentence in the middle, rather than at the beginning. The sentence makes more sense like this: "Now (that salvation, God's kingdom, the Messiah has come) dismiss your servant in peace." This verse and verse 2:35 seems to suggest that Simeon died relatively soon after this pronouncement.

When Simeon says "I have seen your salvation," it does not mean that he is physically blind; rather, that he has seen salvation in the flesh. Salvation is a person, Jesus Christ, and to diminish all truth into something other than Jesus is to do violence to what has been put in place in Scripture. There is also clear allusion to Isaiah 40:5.

There is an inclusion that is added in these prayers. Simeon, or at least the

author—Luke — wants people to understand that this salvation has come for everyone, not just for Israel. By using the term "nation" and "people," there is an assumed inclusivity not always seen in Jewish writing. This Messiah is not just for Jews, but for the Gentiles as well. This is revolutionary and startling in some respects. Simeon, an old Jew, was assenting to the fact that Salvation had come for everyone. What a blessing!

While Israel would always have a special place in God's plan, the Messianic age would be proclaimed throughout the world, and while the Jewish nation would not have its nationalistic dreams fulfilled, something more important was happening. It was also the thing that was so hard for the nation of Israel. They were chosen, but this choosing was not exclusive. God was choosing to be for everyone through Jesus and his work on earth.

1 — Have you ever felt like it wasn't fair that other people receive the same things that you received? Do you think some Jews would have had an issue with what Simeon was saying?

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2 — How do we become more inclusive of people who can receive the gospel? If it is for everyone, how can we be better at making it for them as well?

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3 — Who would you find it hard to want to be saved? Is there someone in your life that has hurt you, left you, or made you uncomfortable? Would you want them to be saved? Be honest.

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33 Jesus' parents were amazed at what was being said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, the baby's mother, "This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. 35 As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul!" 36 Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple. She was the daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was very old. Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. 37 Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four.[c] She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshiping God with fasting and prayer. 38 She came along just as Simeon was talking with Mary and Joseph, and she began praising God. She talked about the child to everyone who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem.

As you can imagine, the parents of Jesus were amazed at all of this. Then, Simeon continued his blessing, yet in his blessing there is talk of falling, separation, pain, and rejection. What a strange blessing. The people who Jesus had come to save would reject him. This is clear at the start of the gospel story, not part of the surprise ending. The instrument God had chosen to be as a symbol and tool for the salvation of all mankind, let alone Israel, would be rejected, made fun of, spoken against, and ultimately killed. And in doing this, the real heart of people would be exposed.

This had to have been difficult for Mary to hear. Her heart would be pierced, and she would be broken apart. God

had provided a savior, but it is not an easy road. It would be difficult and full of anguish. And while many in Israel would reject Jesus, many Gentiles would be saved because of Him.

Then we see that Anna was also there. While Simeon doesn't get any title, Anna is called a Prophet (or Prophetess). She seemed to live in the temple, and had been widowed for 84 years after only being married 7 years to her husband. (By the way, this puts her close to, if not over, 100 years old!)

First, she calls out the parents and begins praising God for Him! Then, she turns and tells everyone that this is what she was waiting for! This is the salvation of Jerusalem.

Why is this important? A couple of reasons: 1) God has been using women in His work forever! To say a woman is any less than a man is heresy. Luke wanted her to have a title he didn't even give Simeon. So perhaps we need to relax when we think that there is some sort of hierarchy between men and women in scripture. 2) She immediately rejoices and tells everyone about Jesus.

Our response to the gospel will always be to go and tell the world what He has done for us. That is just the nature of being given a gift of such import, of such price, that will always move out to the world to let them know what God has done for us!

1 – When did you first meet Jesus? How did He change your life?

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2 – Did you sense freedom when He arrived?

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3 – What does freedom in the gospel mean to you?

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We have come to the end of our Christmas Presence Journey. We have found that His Presence is the Ultimate Present! And His presence was foretold, was prepared for, was experienced by a multitude of different people, and they all had the same reactions, and of course, there was also always the same result. Anytime Jesus shows up, His presence creates in us a willingness to tell the world about Him. We go through emotions; fear, awe, astonishment, joy, reflection, and more. But ultimately we move toward a deep desire to share His presence with everyone that we meet.

From the first interaction with Zechariah and Elizabeth, to the interactions with Mary, Simeon, and Anna, we see that God's plan was going to happen, and it was going to be a fulfillment of all that had been prophesied by those ancient prophets of the Old Testament. Without those precursors, we would not have seen all the signs that showed us who Jesus was, would be, and still is.

The question for you today is simply this: "What are the signs you are looking for in order to see the Messiah in your life?" Once you have seen those signs, how do you act upon them? Do those signs point to a call in your life that God has placed there? Has the Holy Spirit

been whispering to you about what He wants for you and your life? Are you available to be used as an instrument of grace for God today?

These questions need to be answered by each and every one of us. What we can see through these stories is that it takes a great commitment to follow God in this life. It has never been easy, it has never been simple, nor has it been comfortable. However, that is probably where we need to be in order to make all that He wants to happen in our lives and for the kingdom become a reality.

There is a very personal nature to this story. We have encountered it in so many ways that sometimes we find ourselves almost bored with the retelling. However, there is a very 3-dimensional nature to this story. There is a human element of fear and doubt, and then trust. There is a God-element of faithfulness, power, and extraordinary happenings. There is a Jesus element of presence of God as well. By taking just the Lucan account, we have missed some parts of the story, but we have emphasized other parts that are often overlooked. In it, we see God seeking to be closer to His people, challenging them to be faithful to Him, and a willingness to allow the miraculous to be visited on those who are willing to follow Him.

Here are some questions to go along with this week's sermon:

- 1 — After reading all of the previous texts, what do you know about Jesus and this whole instance that you didn't know before?
- 2 — Has that information changed the way that you think about the coming of Jesus in this story?
- 3 — If you were a shepherd, how would you have taken this story?
- 4 — How do the stories of Simeon and Anna augment this story, and what do they do for you? Is the experience they had in any way similar to your waiting for Jesus?
- 5 — Why was it important for Jesus to come at this particular time, in this particular way? Any ideas on this?
- 6 — What can you do to bring the presence of Jesus to someone else in this Christmas season?
- 7 — Do you often or ever feel the presence of God? What is that like? Can you make it tangible for others in your group?
- 8 — How can we, as a church, continually give the Presence of God to the world around us? What difference might that make to those who are seeking to find Him?
- 9 — How can we be God's presence in the world? What would that look like in your life?
- 10 — What is your best Christmas memory? How can you bring that same sort of feeling to someone in your life today?

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