



-In the first Advent, the Christ came a baby by means of an unexpected pregnancy.

+When God surprised his people with children in the OT and in the Gospel accounts, the children were used by God as part of his plan to prepare us for Christ our Savior.

Christmas time celebrates the birth of a special child and is a special time for children around the world. This time of year would feel sad and empty if there were no children to play in the snow, to buy presents for, or to tell them the stories of your family's Christmases from long, long ago.

For Mary, her pregnancy would not have been one of celebration for her neighbors in Nazareth if she had stayed there the whole time. Instead of thinking about what kind of present would be fitting for a shower, the residents of that town may have wondered if she should be stoned. Remember, Joseph was considering ending their betrothal secretly. But God had a plan that he was preparing for since the Garden, and God prepared us for the first noel by means of giving children to mothers who did not think they could have children.

Isaac, Jacob, Perez, Samuel, and John the Baptist all played a major roles in God's plan of salvation that progressed forward to Jesus. Luke starts with a focus on John the Baptist. Like Sarah and Abraham, Elizabeth and Zechariah thought they were too far along in years to have a child. But God blessed them with a child that was to be the last prophet before the Messiah. Jesus later acknowledged that John was like the second coming of Elijah, the prophet of the Most High, as Zechariah says it. The Christmas birth narrative is only in two of the four gospel accounts, but the role of John the Baptist as forerunner to the Messiah is emphasized in all four gospel accounts. John, even as a child, defied the expectations of the culture around him. He would later call Israel to repent and to prepare for the other man in his family born by means of an unexpected pregnancy. John mesmerized Israel with his life and message, and they still adored him decades after his death. But John was a bright star whose greatest quality was his humility. He came to serve God by preparing the people for Jesus and then stepping back out of the light once the Christ made his public appearance, rejoicing in this role even as a baby in his mother's womb.

This willingness to point others to the Lord instead of self was surely modeled by his mother Elizabeth. Mary would not have received a warm reception for her baby

without a father in Nazareth, but Elizabeth celebrated her Lord before Mary was even showing signs of pregnancy. Elizabeth's encouragement propelled Mary to sing or proclaim what is known as the Magnificat, as her soul magnified the Lord. For God had kept his covenant to bring about the Promised Savior.

**39 In those days Mary set out
and hurried to a town in the hill
country of Judah 40 where she
entered Zechariah's house and
greeted Elizabeth.**

41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped inside her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

**42 Then she exclaimed with a
loud cry, "Blessed are you
among women, and your child
will be blessed!"**

43 How could this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For you see, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped for joy inside me.

**45 Blessed is she who has
believed that the Lord would
fulfill what he has spoken to
her!”**

**46 And Mary said:
My soul magnifies the Lord,**

**47 and my spirit rejoices in God my
Savior,
48 because he has looked with
favor
on the humble condition of his
servant.
Surely, from now on all generations
will call me blessed,**

**49 because the Mighty One
has done great things for me,
and his name is holy.**

**50 His mercy is from generation
to generation
on those who fear him.**

**51 He has done a mighty deed
with his arm;
he has scattered the proud
because of the thoughts of their
hearts;
52 he has toppled the mighty
from their thrones
and exalted the lowly.**

**53 He has satisfied the hungry
with good things
and sent the rich away empty.**

**54 He has helped his servant
Israel,
remembering his mercy**

**55 to Abraham and his
descendants forever,
just as he spoke to our
ancestors.**

**56 And Mary stayed with her
about three months; then she
returned to her home.**

**67 Then [John's] father Zechariah
was filled with the Holy Spirit and
prophesied:**

**68 Blessed is the Lord, the God of
Israel,
because he has visited
and provided redemption for his
people.**

**69 He has raised up a horn of
salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
70 just as he spoke by the mouth
of his holy prophets in ancient
times;**

**71 salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of those who
hate us.**

**72 He has dealt mercifully with
our ancestors
and remembered his holy
covenant—**

**73 the oath that he swore to our
father Abraham,
to grant that we,
74 having been rescued
from the hand of our enemies,
would serve him without fear**

**75 in holiness and
righteousness
in his presence all our days.
76 And you, child, will be called
a prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord
to prepare his ways,**

**77 to give his people knowledge
of salvation
through the forgiveness of their
sins.**

**78 Because of our God's merciful
compassion,
the dawn from on high will visit
us**

**79 to shine on those who live in
darkness
and the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of
peace.**

**80 The child grew up and became
strong in spirit, and he was in the
wilderness until the day of his public
appearance to Israel.**



The First Advent of Christ fulfilled the covenant expectations to bring about the Promised Savior.

-The First Advent of Christ fulfilled covenant promises to bring about the Promised Savior.

Last week we looked at the affirmation of God's promise to Abraham that he would bless all nations through his promised son. Both Mary and Zechariah look back to God's promise to Abraham.

This Christmas time that we celebrate is a celebration of fulfilled promises.

Mary was amazed by the memory of YHWH, his covenant loyalty from two millennia before. She also marveled in how God was keeping His promises. An early Latin form of O Come O Come Emmanuel was traditionally sung the week before Christmas in monastic settings. It was sung at the time that Mary's song was read. The later English wording helps us sense the wonder and greatness of this child praised from before his birth, this child that was Emmanuel, God with us. "O Come O come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear."

Israel may have been back in the physical land around Jerusalem, but

they were still not experiencing the blessing of God's presence among them like when David was king. But then the offspring of David and the yet the Son of God came as a baby in the womb.

Zechariah says of this unborn king: 69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us

in the house of his servant David,

70 just as he spoke by the mouth

of his holy prophets in ancient times;

71 salvation from our enemies

and from the hand of those who hate us.

72 He has dealt mercifully with our ancestors

and remembered his holy covenant—

The book of Samuel records the promise that God makes to David regarding his royal household, that he would always have a son upon the throne forever. Isaiah 11 foretells that a green shoot from the hewn trunk of Jesse would arise one day. This surprising descendant will have the Spirit of the Lord upon him, having the Spirit's wisdom and delighting in honoring the Lord, caring for the needy and bringing about righteousness and peace among God's creation, undoing the curse and judgment brought in by the serpent, bringing restoration and blessing to all God's people, which would include people all nations.

For the Jew and the Gentile, for the strong and the lowly, Christ is the only hope for all to have true life.

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Mary and Zechariah are set in contrast through Luke's literary structure. The narrative that focuses on these two figures starts with Zechariah. Zechariah was a powerful and respected man within Israel. He was a priest and was serving within the Temple. He had friends and relatives attempting to look out for his interests when they felt he was being disregarded. But when Gabriel announced to him that he and Elizabeth would have a son, he asked for something else to be his guarantee, something other than God's word through Gabriel.

Now, Contrast this powerful man with Mary, a single girl or young woman without any notoriety within Israel, one who would surely be judged in her lowliness if no one were to stand up in defense of her. She is the first lowly character in Luke, and Luke makes clear that God cares for the low and needy. Jesus, the Lord's salvation, is the only hope for both Mary and Zechariah, for both the powerful and the lowly.

Elizabeth says of Mary:

45 Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill what he has spoken to her!"

46 And [then] Mary said:

My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 because he has looked with favor
on the humble condition of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations
will call me blessed,

49 because the Mighty One
has done great things for me,

and his name is holy.

50 His mercy is from generation to generation
on those who fear him.

Mary realized that her only hope, her people's only hope, and the world's only hope is that God would keep his promise, that God would save by means of this child.

Zechariah echoes Mary's sentiment by speaking to his own son, John. 76 And you, child, will be called

a prophet of the Most High,

for you will go before the Lord

to prepare his ways,

77 to give his people knowledge of salvation

through the forgiveness of their sins.

78 Because of our God's merciful compassion,

the dawn from on high will visit us

79 to shine on those who live in darkness

and the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Zechariah had been humbled by God's forgiveness and mercy for his sin. For his hope was now directed to Jesus, the hope of the world.

"O come thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here; Disperse the gloomy clouds of night and death's dark shadows put to flight."

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The pride of men and women is sadly expected within our world. Because of sin's infection, it creeps into the hearts and minds of people through the smallest cracks of opportunity and power.

At the beginning of the pandemic I read Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death*. I know this may seem morbid to you, but the poem was very fitting. I was acting as one of those few willing to walk into the 7th room draped in black and crimson. Most of the guests to Prince Prospero's banquet wanted to stay in the colorful rooms and not consider the possibility of death. They wanted to avoid pondering that they are finite and mortal. Pride is able to deceive into thinking that we are immune from death, as long as we allow ourselves to be distracted by pride, as long as we feel like we have control over our environment.

Zechariah was accustomed to having control over his immediate environment, but he also realized that God had the power of ultimate judgment, especially after having his voice taken away for 9 months. He chose to act by faith in the promise of God for salvation, showing his faith by naming his son John according to God's command through his angel. Mary personally experienced God's favor as she trusted the Lord by faith, putting her hope in the child that God miraculously put into her womb. This hope is now available to you by this same simple trust.

But Mary also speaks to what God will do to the proud by means of this Promised Son.

51 He has done a mighty deed with his arm;

he has scattered the proud

because of the thoughts of their hearts;

52 he has toppled the mighty from their thrones

and exalted the lowly.

53 He has satisfied the hungry with good things

and sent the rich away empty.

Luke is not saying that wealth, power, or authority are themselves bad. His recordings point to the understanding that wealth and power can be entrapments for sinful mankind without knowing God. Wealth always tests us, asking us do we entrust ourselves to our own power or to God's mighty hand. Pride deceives people into thinking they do not need God nor need to love their fellow man.

With so many in our world having smart phones and access to social media, people feel even more elevated today to judge others in order to make themselves feel right and good. But every single one of us is a rebel who has mocked God and will one day come to the end of this life as we know it, regardless if you consider yourself high or low.

This season may God work on your heart to have you realize whether you know Him by means of faith in Christ or not, whether you are like Mary or like Zechariah before his son's birth, whether you know the One who steps into our darkness to deliver us from death or if you remain in the shadow of death. This child who would become the man who would live and die in our place, will either bring you into new life that has the world dwelling in peace after his return, or He will be your judge that sends you away into eternal punishment. For we all start as the sinners who rebel in pride. But may your heart cry be, "O Come, o come, Desire of Nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind, bind envy, strife and quarrels cease; Fill the whole world with heaven's peace"
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, o Israel."

Emmanuel has come. Does he reside within you? If not, will you respond this Christmas to his call by means of this humble child?