

Mary, Gabriel and Elizabeth  
Luke 1:26–56

Luke 1 – let’s read our Scripture: *In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”*

*Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”*

*“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.” “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.*

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

*And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the lowly state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”*

*Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.*

## 1 This is Not Just the Christmas Story

When we tell the different parts of what we call the Christmas story, let's remember that what we are really telling is the Jesus story. The most important thing about the Christmas story is that it begins the Jesus story. The story of Jesus, from his birth to his death and resurrection, is the most important story that ever happened. The Jesus story is the pearl in the middle of all human history. If there was one story to know, it would be the story of Jesus.

Christmas has gotten cluttered with sentimental attachments, even among believers that celebrate the birth of Jesus. The Bible's stories of our Lord's birth are not to make us feel "Christmas-y," but to begin the Jesus story. By now we might be better off reading these birth stories in May or in August, without all the other stuff that's in the air at Christmas. The birth stories help us understand Jesus, and they lead us into faith. That's why we tell the birth stories of Jesus. Listen for things that are not usually a part of Christmas time.

## 2 Gabriel Visits Mary – Luke 1:26–38

God sent Gabriel to a young woman, which we learn right away, but before the Bible tells us her name, it tells the name of the man she's engaged to, Joseph, and that he's from king David's line. Then we find out that her name is Mary. This strange thing is in both Luke's birth story and also Matthew's: it's critical that Mary's fiancé be in king David's line so that Jesus can inherit David's throne; yet Joseph in David's line has nothing at all to do with the birth of this child.

"You are highly favoured," Gabriel says to Mary. "The Lord is with you!" It is a lavish greeting, much more than Zechariah got. It distressed Mary, though, because she did not know what this meant. "You will conceive a son, and you will name him 'Jesus.'" "Jesus" is actually "Joshua." What Mary heard was, "call the baby 'Joshua.'"

"Jesus," "Joshua," means "salvation." The angels told the shepherds, "Today in the town of David a *savior* has been born to you." When old Simeon has baby Jesus in his arms, he says to God, "my eyes have seen your *salvation*." That's why Jesus got that name.

*He will be great (said Gabriel) and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.*

Son of the Most High: back in 2 Samuel, when God promised David that one of his descendants would always rule God's people, God told David, "when your descendant is on the throne, I will be as a father to him, and he will be as a son to me."

So for the Jews, "son of God" was another way of saying the Messiah. They assumed a human in David's line, but since God said, "I will be as a father to him, and he will be as a son to me," "son of God" meant the Christ. That's what Gabriel meant, and that's what Mary understood.

When Gabriel spoke to Zechariah, Gabriel quoted the prophet Malachi to tell Zechariah about his son. Here Gabriel quotes from 2 Samuel and from Isaiah, to explain to Mary about her son.

When Jesus was born, his royalty was central. He was born to sit on David's throne and rule there forever, in Luke and Matthew both. Then we don't hear much of Jesus being king until he's on trial just before his crucifixion. Then again, we hear about Jesus being the king of the Jews. That's what Pilate talks to him about, and that's the sign on the cross: the king of the Jews. Gabriel leaves no doubt about this: *“The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”* (Isaiah 9:7).

Mary does not understand how she can conceive, since she's not living with a man. She's engaged to Joseph, presumably she'd be married with in a year, but Gabriel must have let Mary know that she will conceive pretty much right away, at the most a few days. Mary can't see how that would be, so Gabriel says, *“The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.”*

In the Old Testament, there are “birth announcements,” and there are also “call stories,” where God calls someone into a particular service, like Moses or Gideon. The commentaries say that this birth announcement is actually more like a call story. When God calls someone into service, he says, “I am with you.” Gabriel did not say that to Zechariah, but he did to Mary. “The Lord is with you.” Mary's response at the end also makes this a call story

*“I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.”* We need to pause at Mary's response. She agrees to be at God's service. There is something delicate going on here. By means of the Holy Spirit, God plans to make this young woman pregnant. This is a sensitive proceeding. God is asking a lot, except that he's not really asking.

So Mary's response is critical, not only that she responds this way, but also that the Bible makes sure to report it. She says “yes” in two different ways. First, “I am the Lord's servant.” When she hears God's plan for her, she says, “I am at His service.” She submits. Then she says, “May your word to me be fulfilled.” That's stronger. She is not just submitting, she is ready. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” That means, “I'm ready,” “let's do this,” “may it happen.”

Mary is a model for us. What if God did something like this to you? What if God sent an angel to you, and the angel described exactly the situation in which you now find yourself. And the message was that God wanted you to be his faithful servant in your exact situation.

There is a remarkable paragraph in the middle of 1 Corinthians 7 that teaches us that our situation is our calling. Our situation is our assignment. God has called us to exactly where we find ourselves. None of us are any less called than Mary was.

Mary got an angel to tell her, and Mary had a unique assignment. We don't get an angel, and our assignment is not as unique as hers. But we are all called, and we all have our own assignment.

We have Mary’s words as an example to follow. So look at your life, exactly as it is right now, and say, “God, this is Your call to me. I am Your servant. May it be to me as You have said.”

### 3 Mary Visits Elizabeth – 1:39–45

This is a potent little meeting. Gabriel told Mary that Elizabeth was pregnant, so Mary went to see Elizabeth. There are four people in this visit. John is in Elizabeth’s womb, six months along, and Mary has conceived Jesus by this time. So Mary greets Elizabeth, and immediately the unborn John greets unborn Jesus by jumping for joy in Elizabeth’s womb.

And then the Spirit uses John’s joy to tell Elizabeth that Mary is pregnant with the Christ himself. Elizabeth should not even know that Mary is pregnant, let alone with the Messiah. Gabriel never said anything to Zechariah about the Messiah, although Zechariah may have put that together. But he’s still not talking.

Gabriel told Zechariah that John would be filled with the Spirit from his mother’s womb. The Spirit made known to John that the Christ was in the room, carried by the woman who had just spoken to his mother Elizabeth. The Spirit tells John who this is, and Elizabeth feels John jump for joy inside her and then the Spirit tells her who this is.

Unborn John greets unborn Jesus by jumping for joy in Elizabeth’s womb. Elizabeth “shouted with a loud voice and said, ‘Blessed are you...’” Elizabeth is too old to jump for joy, especially being six months pregnant, but with her voice she does all of that. It is a very happy meeting.

These two women have both conceived miraculously and are together as expecting mothers, and they both know that their two babies are going to set in motion God’s final act in human history. For the most part, the events of John’s birth and Jesus’s birth happen apart from each other, but in this scene they are very much together.

### 4 Mary’s Praise – Luke 1:46–56

1 Samuel begins with the story of Hannah. She could not have children, like Elizabeth, and then God answered her prayer and she became pregnant and gave birth to Samuel. Samuel was Hannah’s miracle child. And then in 1 Samuel 2 Hanna praised God. Mary’s praise in Luke 1 echoes Hannah’s praise in 1 Samuel. Mary knew Hannah’s song pretty well, and Mary thought that was the right way to praise God herself, with some adapting.

Mary’s song has three parts. In the first she thanks God for how good he has been to her.

*“My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has been mindful of the lowly state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.”*

Mary is so delighted about what God has done for her. She’s bursting with praise for him. “He has been mindful of the lowly state of his servant.” “He noticed his lowly servant girl.”

Mary is using Hannah’s song, and Hannah had a particular trial that God took away. I think because of circumstances we do not know, Mary thought that she was the least likely to be chosen by God for this. Like Gideon, who was surprised to be chosen because he was from the smallest clan in his tribe, and Gideon himself the least important person in his family. But God chose him, and God chose Mary. Mary thought there were reasons why this should not be her, and now all generations will call her blessed. God noticed his lowly servant girl.

In the second part of her song, she says that God does this for all of his people!

*His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.  
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.  
He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.*

Mary is getting political here, make no mistake. God goes after the proud, the rulers, and the rich. God takes care of those who fear him. He lifts up the humble, and fills the hungry with good things. What God did for her, he will do for all who fear him.

For Mary, that’s the meaning of baby Jesus, that’s the meaning of the infant in the manger. God has plans that will yet turn the world around. God will turn society upside down, and Mary’s child will be at the front of that.

The last part of Mary’s song focusses on Israel. First, remember what Gabriel told Mary just a few days earlier. *The Lord God will give [your baby] the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.*

So in the last part of her song, Mary puts this in her own words: *“The Mighty One has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”*

When Gabriel speaks to Zechariah and then to Mary, he shows them how God is keeping his promises to Israel. That’s why Gabriel quotes the prophets. When Zechariah and Mary praise God, they praise him for keeping his promises to Israel.

We who are Gentiles should be glad about this. Don’t feel left out, but be encouraged, because it means God remembers all his old promises, and he keeps them. He’s made us a lot of promises too. If he’s keeping his promises to Israel, he’ll keep his promises to us. Old Simeon in the temple said baby Jesus was salvation for all the nations, a light to reveal God to the Gentiles, and the glory of God’s people Israel. Otherwise, in Luke 1–2, John and Jesus are for Israel.

Our Scripture ends, *Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.* Mary went to visit Elizabeth in Elizabeth's sixth month. Then she stayed about three months. We should probably understand that Mary stayed until John was born, and that Mary heard Zechariah's speech. That's probably what Luke means.

## 5 The Meaning of Christmas in Luke 1–2

Christmas is about John's powerful ministry to get people ready to meet God. People need to be prepared for God, and John came to do a great work of preparing people.

Christmas is about us following Mary's example and saying about our own lives: "I am your servant, Lord. I am ready to do what you have said."

Christmas is about God scattering those who are proud in their inmost thoughts, bringing rulers down from their thrones but lifting up the humble. It is about God filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty.

Christmas includes what old Simeon said: this baby would cause the falling and the rising of many in Israel. The child will be a sign that will be spoken against. And Mary, he said, a sword will pierce your soul, too.

And there is a lot of joy in Luke's stories, lots of it. But, people, it was not joy because it was Christmas time. It was joy because God was on the move! God was actually starting his last big plan, he was really doing it, and he was doing it with those few people. Eschatological joy. God was beginning the End. It was the beginning of God making everything right, and they knew it. That's the birth of Jesus in Luke 1–2. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, this is such a good story. Thank you. This beginning was so long ago, we sometimes wonder if you've forgotten. Maybe we're the ones who have forgotten. Thank you for reminding us. Father, we want to be like Mary. We are your servants, Lord. We are ready to do what you have said. May the God who calls us be faithful to do it. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love, and into Christ's perseverance. May the Lord of peace give you peace, at all times, in every way. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.