Week 3

Immanuel: God with Us

This week, we contemplate the miracle of hope breaking through in the First Advent, as God miraculously worked in the lives of ordinary people like Mary, Joseph, Zechariah, and Elizabeth to enter into the world as Immanuel—God with us.

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. . . . HIS KINGDOM WILL NEVER END.

Luke 1:31-33





12/13 GREATNESS AND GRACE

BY RACHEL KANG

Matthew 1:1-17

During Advent, as we seek to encounter and worship Christ, we often look for him in the shining star that led the Magi to the miracle in the manger. We look for Christ in the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We look for him in the heavenly host of angels singing to shepherds watching o'er flocks by night.

We don't often think to look for Jesus in his genealogy. There we see the mention of great men like Abraham, the father of our faith, or King David, the warrior and worshiper. Yet the Messiah's genealogy highlights not only greatness but also grace. His lineage names not only leaders but also those least expected—unlikelies like Tamar, a tainted woman; Ruth, a Moabite; and Rahab, a woman of the night.

A genealogy isn't just a list of names to skim and skip through. Genealogies are paragraphs of paradoxes that point to a God of the impossible. A God who had it in his mind for our Messiah to come from a bloodline of kingdoms and crowns as well as from criminals and castaways.

The genealogy of "Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham" not only invites us to ponder that God chose some of the unlikeliest of people, places, and plots to accomplish his plans for his people; it also provides us a record of promises and prophecies from the heart of a faithful God who fulfilled the very future he foretold. More than a mere summary filled with names, Matthew's genealogy of Jesus reveals the fulfilled prophecy of a Messiah who'd "come up from the stump of Jesse" (Isa. 11:1) and the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that through him "all nations on earth will be blessed" and that his descendants would be "numerous as the stars in the sky" (Gen. 22:17–18).

So lean into this list of names. Let it lead you into holy living as we persevere in the time and space between Christ's birth and Christ's return. Let it remind you that we can trust in God's Word and in his promise to make good of our unlikely lives and, ultimately, to make good of this unlikely world. So linger long in the lineage of Christ, praising God for all that he has done, all the while waiting—with eager and expectant hope—for all that is to come.

THIS IS THE GENEALOGY OF JESUS THE MESSIAH THE SON OF DAVID, THE SON OF ABRAHAM.

Matthew 1:1

PONDER MATTHEW 1:1-17. Also consider reflecting on the stories of Tamar (Gen. 38), Ruth (Ruth 1:1-5; 4:13-22), Rahab (Josh. 2), David (2 Sam. 23:1-4), and Abraham (Gen. 22; Rom. 4:1-3). How does Jesus' genealogy point toward his purpose? How does it deepen your trust in God?

12/14 **HOLD ON**

BY RICH VILLODAS

Luke 1:5-25

BUT THE ANGEL SAID
TO HIM: "DO NOT BE
AFRAID, ZECHARIAH;
YOUR PRAYER HAS
BEEN HEARD. YOUR
WIFE ELIZABETH
WILL BEAR YOU A
SON, AND YOU ARE
TO CALL HIM JOHN."
Luke 1:13

In an instant society in which we can order something online and get it an hour later, we often have a hard time waiting. Yet, as Simone Weil said, "Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life."

Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, had been waiting for a long time. "They were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old" (Luke 1:7). Zechariah means he whom the Lord remembers. There's a painful irony here, for though his name means the Lord remembers, in all the long years of waiting, it likely felt as if the Lord had forgotten him.

But in Luke 1:5–25, everything changes. The angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and says, *You will have a son*. This news is so incredible, so shocking, that Zechariah's response is *This is impossible*. It's hard for Zechariah to believe it's going to happen. And because he doesn't believe, Zechariah gets a case of angelic laryngitis for the next nine months until his son is born.

Zechariah and Elizabeth's story reminds us that a faithful response to waiting is prayer. Gabriel told Zechariah, "Your prayer has been heard" (v. 13). This statement gives us insight into how Zechariah and Elizabeth handled their long years of disappointment: They persevered in prayer. They prayed even when things did not unfold as they expected them to. They held on to God, even in the midst of social disgrace, disappointment, and hopelessness.

But, of course, their waiting was not perfect. Consider verse 20: "You *did not believe* my words, which *will come true* at their appointed time" (emphasis added). Even though Zechariah lacked faith, God still performs the miracle. Advent reminds us that even though our faith is not always strong, God is faithful to come. We may doubt, get depressed, become discouraged, or want to give up, yet God is still gracious to come.

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is both beautiful and frustrating. It's beautiful because their long waiting ends with answered prayer. But it's also frustrating because we know that not all of our prayers are answered in this same way. This is the complexity of Advent—human suffering and divine grace—and we hold it all together. Whether it is in this life or the life to come, we know God will make all things new. So with Zechariah and Elizabeth, we hold on.

This article is adapted from a sermon Rich Villodas preached on December 8, 2019. Used by permission.

REFLECT ON LUKE 1:5–25. In what ways might you relate to or empathize with Zechariah? What does this account reveal to you about God? About suffering? About waiting?

12/15 PART OF THE STORY

BY KEN SHIGEMATSU

Luke 1:26-38

"I AM THE LORD'S SERVANT," MARY ANSWERED. "MAY YOUR WORD ME BE FULFILLED." Luke 1:38 Mary is incredibly famous today, but there was a time when she was completely unknown. She was just a teenage peasant girl from Nazareth, a town which some scholars say may have had fewer than 100 people. Like her peers, Mary was probably illiterate. Given her station in life, she would have been expected to marry humbly—a poor, working-class boy. Their family would likely often go hungry because there wasn't enough to make ends meet.

When the God of the universe decided to choose his mother, he didn't approach a young woman of wealth and status. Instead, God approached an illiterate peasant girl from a very small town. Jesus' genealogy (Matt. 1:1–17) shows us that we don't have to be of a particular race or be an "insider" to be part of God's story. And when we look at Mary, we see that we don't have to be rich, from a big city, highly educated, or important in society. We can be dirt ordinary and yet be part of this everlasting story.

What is the one qualification that God seems to require? When the angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her, *You're about to become the mother of God*, Mary opened up her heart and said, *Yes, may it be to me as you have said*. To become part of this story and to experience God birthing his life in us, all we need is a yes. We need to consent to the work of the Holy Spirit inside us.

Recently, I've been praying something called the Welcoming Prayer. I pray it like this: Holy Spirit, I agree to your work in me and I let go of my desire for security, for affection and esteem, for power and control. This was the essence of Mary's yes to God. She let go of security, affection and esteem, and power and control. As a result, her reputation would be stained for the rest of her life. She'd one day see her adult son mocked, spat upon, beaten, and nailed to a Roman cross. It would feel like a dagger piercing her heart (Luke 2:35). Yet she said yes.

May we, like Mary, pray, "Holy Spirit, I say yes to your work in me." May God's life be birthed in us. May we too play our part in the grand and everlasting story of God.

This article is adapted from a sermon Ken Shigematsu preached on December 25, 2019. Used by permission.

CONTEMPLATE LUKE 1:26–38. What might it look like for you to say yes like Mary? To consent to the work of the Spirit within you? Pray, welcoming God's work in your life.

12/16 HOPE WHEN THE FUTURE CRUMBLES

BY CATHERINE MCNIEL

Matthew 1:18-24

AN ANGEL OF THE
LORD APPEARED
TO HIM IN A DREAM
AND SAID, "JOSEPH
SON OF DAVID, DO
NOT BE AFRAID TO
TAKE MARY HOME AS
YOUR WIFE, BECAUSE
WHAT IS CONCEIVED
IN HER IS FROM THE
HOLY SPIRIT."

Matthew 1:20

What did Joseph hope for in life? We don't know much about this carpenter who lived so long ago. Matthew tells us he was righteous and faithful. We see firsthand that he was compassionate, wanting to protect Mary even as his future crumbled. Joseph knew how to sacrifice for the sake of duty, becoming a husband to Mary and father to Jesus under disquieting circumstances. He later fled to Egypt, leaving behind family, home, and work to protect the toddler boy who was not his own (Matt. 2:13–15).

We see a glimpse of Joseph in his choices, but I wish we knew more. What did the angel's strange tidings mean for him, and how did he make sense of it all? Had Joseph longed for marriage and a family? Did he yearn for Mary, or was the betrothal brokered by her parents? When he first learned of her pregnancy, was he heartbroken? Or angry? Or frustrated by the delays and red tape of divorcing her?

We'll never know for sure what Joseph hoped for from life, but it certainly wasn't this: a pregnant fiancée, an unborn child not his own, a lifetime of gossip and slander still ahead. Who would believe the angel's story? Would you? Did he?

Maybe he didn't, entirely. Most of us would not, could not, no matter how much we wanted to. Babies were conceived the same way then as now. Perhaps Joseph wrestled with lingering doubts, praying something like another biblical father would: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

Whatever Joseph wanted from life, marriage, and fatherhood, we know he was given a steeper climb than he hoped. And yet, he stepped forward. Joseph actively set his face toward a long-term hope that God would prove faithful and true, that a far-off redemption would be powerful enough to overturn all this suffering and darkness, all this bitter disappointment.

They named Mary's boy Jesus, a common name, believing that he also bore another name—Immanuel—and believing that this scandalous birth story would be redeemed by divine scandal, "God with us." Joseph wagered his life, family, future, and identity on the chance that God was faithful—that this common boy, this source of so much initial disappointment and upheaval in Joseph's life, was indeed the hope of the world.

READ MATTHEW 1:18–24, prayerfully engaging your imagination to step into Joseph's story. What might he have thought or felt? What does he show us about faithfulness and hope?

12/17 A SONG OF MERCY AND IUSTICE

BY RICH VILLODAS

Luke 1:39-56

AND MARY SAID:
"MY SOUL GLORIFIES
THE LORD . . . HIS
MERCY EXTENDS TO
THOSE WHO FEAR HIM,
FROM GENERATION
TO GENERATION."

Luke 1:46, 50

In Luke 1:39–56, Mary leaves her hometown to be with her relative Elizabeth. When she gets there, she learns that Elizabeth is pregnant as well. And when Elizabeth sees Mary, the baby inside her womb jumps for joy. Elizabeth says, *God's favor is on you, Mary*. She affirms and confirms God's words to Mary.

And out of the joy of this encounter, Mary starts to sing. She bursts forth with exuberance and rejoicing. She sings about the goodness of God, then focuses on God's mercy. She says, "His mercy extends to those who fear him" (v. 50). She sings, "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful" (v. 54).

We tend to think of mercy in a limited way, such as providing relief for someone who is in pain. But in Scripture mercy goes much deeper and further than that. Yes, it speaks of compassion, but it also speaks of God's loyalty to and fierce love for his people.

Mary's song is also a song of justice. She sings, "He has scattered those who are proud. ... 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" (vv. 51–53). When Mary sings, she's essentially saying, *God's justice is coming*.

Justice, biblically speaking, is about God taking everything that's wrong with the world and making it right. In God's kingdom, things are turned upside down. The least are now the greatest. The last are now the first. Justice is God taking what's broken and bringing it to wholeness. In Advent, a season of longing and expectation, we wait for God to make things right. And this is a key theme in Mary's song: *Lord, make it right*.

Mary's song reminds us that there is no sin so deep that God's mercy doesn't go deeper. The good news of Advent is that God has come and God is coming in the person of Jesus—and he offers mercy that goes deeper than our sin. Mary's song also reminds us that there's nothing so wrong with the world that God's justice won't one day make right. This is why we sing: because of God's mercy, because of God's justice. This is why we wait for Jesus to come again: because when he comes, he's making all things new.

This article is adapted from a sermon Rich Villodas preached on December 5, 2019. Used by permission.

PONDER LUKE 1:39–56. How does Mary's song emphasizing God's mercy and justice speak into your own life today? How does it offer hope to our hurting world?

12/18 THE LIGHT AND THE KING

BY JAY Y. KIM

Isaiah 9:2-7; 40:1-5 Luke 1:57-80; 3:1-6

AND YOU, MY CHILD,
WILL BE CALLED A
PROPHET OF THE MOST
HIGH; FOR YOU WILL
GO ON BEFORE THE
LORD TO PREPARE
THE WAY FOR HIM.

Luke 1:76

Zechariah and Elizabeth named their baby John, which means *God is gracious and has shown us favor*. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah prophesied over his son: "You will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 1:76–79).

When we fast-forward to John the Baptist's adult life, we see he does exactly that. Luke records,

He went into all the country... preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation.'" (3:3–6)

These ideas from Isaiah about reshaping valleys, hills, and roads to prepare the way were, in the ancient world, associated with the arrival of royalty. And, indeed, John's ministry focused on this one thing: declaring that a king was on the way.

Zechariah's prophecy over his newborn includes a paraphrase of another passage from Isaiah: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned" (9:2). The people who heard Zechariah prophesy these words would have known exactly what this Isaiah passage was about: the promise of a coming king. It's part of the same familiar passage that declares, "For to us a child is born . . . He will reign on David's throne" (vv. 6–7).

This offers such immense hope for us. As much as we may like to believe that we can create the peace and joy we desire through our own efforts, the story of John the Baptist and the words of Zechariah and Isaiah emphatically declare that the peace and joy every human longs for will not be realized until the king arrives. John the Baptist literally gave his life to proclaim this truth—to help people see that a light was about to break through the darkness.

This article is adapted from a sermon Jay Y. Kim preached on December 9, 2018. Used by permission.

CONSIDER LUKE 1:57-80 ALONGSIDE ISAIAH 9:2-7; 40:1-5; AND LUKE 3:1-6.

Which parts of Zechariah's prophecy stand out to you? How do these passages convey the hope of Advent?

12/19 A GOD WE CAN TOUCH

BY CATHERINE MCNIEL

Luke 2:1-7

IN THOSE DAYS CAESAR
AUGUSTUS ISSUED A
DECREE THAT A CENSUS
SHOULD BE TAKEN OF
THE ENTIRE ROMAN
WORLD. (THIS WAS
THE FIRST CENSUS
THAT TOOK PLACE
WHILE QUIRINIUS WAS
GOVERNOR OF SYRIA.)

Luke 2:1-2

It was said that the gods of the ancient world lived outside time and space, on a different plane from our mortal existence, unreachable. On earth, in the hopes of glimpsing divinity, the ancients established hallowed places—a sacred tree or mountain, a holy temple or city—which they believed existed in both spheres, like a window to heaven. The people traveled to these holy places on holy days, believing the divine and mundane might nearly overlap for one reverent moment.

Luke takes pains to communicate that *this* story, *this* God, *this* mingling of divinity and humanity are altogether different. The Creator is arriving *here*, to our muddy, dusty, physical, emotional, beautiful, terrible world. Like a midwife carefully noting the time and place of birth, Luke clarifies that God's birth interrupts a particular event—the Roman census—in a particular place—the town of Bethlehem—in a particular family—the house of David. Jesus is born into history, to a specific woman, exactly here and exactly now. We might gloss over these local details, but to Gentile readers Luke's statement would be jarring.

On this night, God does not come like the gods of old, on a cloud or a storm, his untouchable power barely glimpsed through a holy mirror. No, God falls into the arms of his mother, arriving on this earth the way we all do. For months she carried him, for hours she labored with pain and blood and struggle, pushing until God was born on earth among us, an infant, vulnerable, wrinkled, and wet. Exhausted from the ordeal and sleeping now but soon to awaken, howling and hungry.

This is Luke's unbelievable news: The true God came near to us physically, tangibly, in a way that we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands. God arrived in a village we could walk to, during a year we can remember. Divinity took on flesh in a mother's womb, interrupting a marriage, a night, and a village like any other birth. We no longer meet God in sacred places and spiritual spheres but here on the ground, in the dirt, in our families and flesh and blood.

It is a shocking idea, even for us so many centuries later. There is no longer a separation between sacred and mundane. Our messy, daily lives are exactly where God is found, where God is at work. This is a God we can touch.

REFLECT ON LUKE 2:1-7, considering the details Luke uses to situate this event in space and time. Why is this significant? What does it emphasize to you about God? About Advent?



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ADVENT: LIVING HOPE

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Christianity Today.com

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