



The Incredible Christmas



What did Mary learn about this child she was to carry?

Mary is told to name the baby Jesus. The name Jesus means 'to deliver, to save or rescue'. His name tells us what he was coming into the world to do. God would use this child 'to save' the world – 'to rescue' a world that is broken and damaged.

This child will grow to 'to save and rescue' people from the damage and brokenness of sin and death. This baby will grow to become the most extraordinary man to live – to teach with wisdom and authority; to bring healing to the sick; to demonstrate grace to the most vulnerable; and to ultimately die on a cross and be resurrected from the dead; to show us the love of God.

This child was to be God 'in the flesh' – to be a God who is present and near to us and not distant and remote. To show us a God of humility who knows what it means to live in our world with all its joys and pain.

If you are wondering what God is like – look at Jesus.

At Christmas, the Creator of the Universe enters our world. This God who knows what it is like to be born; to be weak and vulnerable; to be powerless; to be a refugee; to be hungry and cry and grow up as a teenager. A God who knows disappointment and joy and what it means to grow up in a family. He knows our joys and our struggles in life.

Mary receives this message in the way that we are invited to receive this message: in awe, and bewilderment, and astonishment. Although not much more than a child herself, Mary receives the word with obedience and resolution:

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'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary said. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.' (Luke 1:38)

This Advent, may we become more open to receiving the Word of Christ deep into the very centre of our lives. Might the shock of it result in a renewed sense of humility and service. And might the love of Christ grow in us to full maturity.

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PRAYER

*Lord Jesus Christ, Eternal Word,
You came as a human being in the womb of Mary.
You, through whom the universe was created,
began your earthly course, in the womb of a humble virgin.
At the announcement of this miracle,
Mary responded in faith:
"Let it be done to me according to your word."
May we who are made new creatures by your grace,
respond with such faith,
when you call us to your service. Amen*



Sermon 2:

An Incredible God!



BIBLE READING

Luke 1:46-56 (Powerpoint)

WATCH VIDEO: An Incredible God!

MESSAGE

Mary has genuine concerns and fears. In the Jewish world of first century Israel, her pregnancy was a scandal. A teenage girl pregnant and unmarried was full of shame.

What will her parents think of her being pregnant and not married? What will Joseph think? What will others in their community think of her and the family? She will bring shame on herself and her family. How can she explain this to people and not be seen as a mad woman? Why would they listen to a teenage girl in the first century Middle Eastern world?

Are you ever concerned with what others think or how you are seen by others?

Yet Mary recognises that this pregnancy is much bigger than her own personal – and genuine concerns.

She begins to anticipate the beginning of a major new work of God in the world. God's kingdom breaking into the world. This is a world that looks very different to our world – and the world of the first century Roman Empire.

In a world where the rich and famous are celebrated, Mary tells of a God and the in breaking of a revolutionary kingdom where the rich, proud and powerful oppressors are brought down and God looks to lift up the humble and lowly and fill the hungry and poor. This was incredible and scandalous news.

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*'... 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.'* (Luke 2:51-52)



God is coming into the world to turn the values of the world upside down. The people the world features on social media and television and cinemas are humbled and the people who are most vulnerable are lifted up. Jesus will get into trouble with the moralistic, religious and powerful people too because he spends his time eating and drinking with 'tax collectors and sinners.' He spent time with scandalous people. This God was incredible and unexpected!

Who have you been eating and drinking with lately?

Mary and Elizabeth – and so many people of Israel had been longing to see the day – waiting and waiting to see the day when God would remember his promises to Abraham and act to bring in his kingdom and put the world right. Injustice was rampant, the Roman Empire looked to be in control, there was no care for the poor and vulnerable, and the people of God were longing for their God to intervene.

Mary and Elizabeth wait. Pregnant women learn to wait. A birth cannot be forced or rushed. The coming of God cannot be forced and cannot be rushed. They have received promises from God and they are learning to trust God. Will he come through?

Eternity swings on this moment.

Have you ever waited on God, fully aware that the current situation is utterly beyond your control? Have you ever wondered how God was going to work out his purposes in your life? Have you ever waited and waited for God to act when you have been in pain – and your life has been a mess? Waited while others sleep peacefully, oblivious to the gravity of your situation?

This is the discipline of Advent – waiting expectantly, humbly, trusting. This, of all times, is the time of year when it's okay to pray nervously, 'God, help me!'

Christian hope is not passive patience that quietly waits with hands folded and eyes closed. Instead, hope cries to God in despair and protest. Hope cries out for God to turn from his silence and speak. Mary longs to see God act in the world – and so do we.

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PRAYER

God of comfort, these times seem so uncertain, so incredible. The world seems darker than it has in the past and the future is uncertain. Maybe that's a good thing. Maybe we are now turning to you with a realisation that we need you so much more and that our lives are not in our control.

Hold us all in your loving arms and let us be comforted by the strength and peace you want so much to offer us through the birth of your son, Jesus. Thank you for the many gifts you offer us.



Sermon 3:

An Incredible Birth

– on a not so silent night



BIBLE READING

Luke 2:1-20 Christmas Day (Powerpoint)

WATCH VIDEO: An Incredible Birth – on a not so silent night

MESSAGE

Mary has just given birth to Jesus - but not in her home town with her family. She is a long way from her family support. Heavily pregnant, she has had to travel 150 kilometres by donkey on the dusty dirt road from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It would have taken several days and she would have been exhausted. She had no air conditioning, no hospitals and no family support – other than Joseph.

Mary and Joseph had to do this because a politician - the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus had told everyone to go to his home town to be registered. In effect, he's saying, "I need to know how many people are in the empire so I can know how much to tax you."

He saw himself as a god and figured a god should live in luxury and ease, and that the people, his subjects, should pay for his luxuries. So he taxed them. He didn't care how his taxes placed financial burdens on the people, and he didn't care that his method of registration disrupted the lives of his subjects. So Joseph and Mary had to leave their home town in Nazareth with their family and travel to Bethlehem – Joseph's home town.

Things only get worse. When they finally arrive in Bethlehem, there is no place for them to stay. All the inns - all the Airbnb's in town - were full. This is not a great way to start a marriage or a family!

An uncaring Emperor caused Joseph and Mary great troubles, but they endured them without complaining or becoming bitter, and God acts on their behalf and everything changes.

History tells us that Caesar Augustus was praised for having brought peace. But we know it was not a real or a lasting peace. The philosopher Epictetus said, 'While the emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief and envy. He cannot give peace of heart for which man yearns more than even for outward peace.'



(Powerpoint slide) Incredibly, a group of angels appear to a group of shepherds saying:

*'Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace to men on
Whom his favour rests.'* (2:14)

The angels make the incredible claim that Jesus, this baby, will bring true peace to the world. Peace does not come through the money, power and force of the Emperor, but through the humility and sacrificial service of Christ – the Son of God. These were incredible claims at the time and incredible claims today.

We imagine that peace comes with money or retirement or a holiday. The reality is that money, retirement and even a holiday, can be sources of stress and anxiety. They can provide peace for a time, but they don't necessarily bring contentment and peace – certainly not a deep and sure peace.

The promise of Jesus' birth is fulfilled and he is identified as the Saviour, the Christ and Lord. The birth of Jesus is a long-awaited moment and all of creation ends up joining in glorifying God as a result. It had been an incredible few days and months for Mary and now she was trying to make sense of it all.

(Powerpoint slide) Luke tells us that:

'Mary treasured up these things and pondered them in her heart.' (Luke 2:19)

Mary is trying to make sense of what is happening to her and around her. Mary is in a strange town away from family. She has been through a grueling journey and just given birth – she is tired, her hormones are all over the place and she is learning what it means to be a new mother.

Jesus has yet to do anything of note – he screams and needs feeding and changing like any newborn. It was not a silent night! He looks weak and vulnerable. His public ministry of teaching and healing is many years away and he looks just like any other child. She is again wondering 'What does this all mean?'

This Christmas, we are called to humble ourselves and give thanks to God – who came to bring peace and show the love of God for the world. A peace and unconditional love that is deep and lasting and cannot be taken away. Christmas is just the beginning of the incredible life and work of Jesus.

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PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for this Christmas Day – the day we remember and celebrate the incredible birth of Jesus, the Christ, our Lord and Saviour of the world.

We give you thanks for the peace that Jesus brings to this world and our lives. Help us to know your forgiveness and grace and love and go into the world to love and serve. In the name of Jesus.

Amen

