

Waiting On a Promise

DORENA WILLIAMSON



*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

The Old Testament concludes with a promise of one who would reconcile the hearts of fathers to their children. Those words ending the book of Malachi echoed over centuries of silence. In the period of waiting between the Old and New Testaments, our Mighty God was setting up the tumultuous world stage for the coming of the Prince of Peace.

There is a time for everything, and Luke 1 is an intricate tapestry of divine appointments. The setting was an appointed time in history: during the reign of Herod. Zechariah was appointed for a once-in-a-lifetime priestly duty. Elizabeth's long years of infertility were an appointed impossible situation that set up the miraculous conception of John the Baptist. The couple's priestly lineage was an

appointed heritage for raising an anointed son. And Gabriel was the appointed messenger to announce God's appointed purpose for John the Baptist.

When they were young and starting out their life together, Zechariah and Elizabeth were likely full of hopeful expectations about their future. But as infertile months turned into years, the hope of having a child ebbed away and felt like a burden of "disgrace" (Luke 1:25).

When we're introduced to this couple, they're now "very old" yet are continuing to walk with God. This *faithfulness* deserves our commendation—rather than criticism of Zechariah's moment of unbelief. After all, this aged man had grown so familiar with disappointment.

Zechariah had persevered in prayer through seemingly dark and silent years. But on this day, as he performed the priestly duty of lighting the fire to burn incense, Gabriel appeared and announced that God had heard his prayer. God was *with* Zechariah—even when heaven seemed silent. The Light of the World had not forgotten; he was sovereignly preparing history for the appointed time.

Zechariah and Elizabeth's story offers us perspective on our own seasons of waiting. We're reminded that there's no expiration date on our prayers. The faithfulness of this couple unfolded into a life-giving season

of joy as God's promise came to fulfillment through their child, the forerunner of the Messiah.

But as we enter into their story, there is also no skipping over their decades of infertility. We enter into this painful part of their lives too. For in their long sorrow, we see their strong faith.

Elizabeth understood that in this miracle, God had shown her special favor. Many biblical heroes did not receive what they hoped for or what had been promised them this side of eternity (Heb. 11:39). The ultimate fulfillment of their faith was beyond them—as it also is for us. This Advent, in our waiting, there is a bigger picture being painted—in God's appointed time. Immanuel—God with us—is still faithful to his promises today.

Reflect on Luke 1:5–25.

How do you see faithfulness in this story? Zechariah and Elizabeth's faithfulness? God's? How do you see God's sovereignty? God's presence?

The Beautiful Paradox

KELLY M. KAPIC

*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.*

LUKE 1:31–32

The abstract concept of *power* brings to mind earthquakes and thunderstorms or maybe presidents and billionaires. Raw power stops us in our tracks, causing us to give heed to whatever or whoever wields it. Few of us, however, associate power with the womb. Yet Mary’s womb carried true power, hidden in darkness, unseen, hard to imagine.

Here we encounter one of the most beautiful paradoxes of the Christian faith: The Holy Spirit brought into being a tiny baby boy in this woman’s womb, her own flesh and bone, her firstborn son; this same baby boy was none other than the Son of God, identified as the “Son of the Most High.”

So is Jesus Mary’s son or God’s Son? Human or divine? Yes! Both are true in one person, this one baby boy. We can imagine God bringing salvation, or we can picture a heroic human doing revolutionary things. But a single person



who is at the same time both fully God and fully human, without compromising the integrity of either? This is truly a beautiful paradox—a paradox at the heart of human salvation.

This power is not a bare, infinite force abstracted from all other definition but the compassion of the eternal, glorious, holy God clothed in human flesh. His power takes the form of weakness in divine solidarity with humankind, all driven by his holy love.

The angel proclaimed a glorious event to Mary—and to us. Jesus gets his full humanity from Mary, becoming like the rest of us in all ways except that he refuses sin (Heb. 4:15). Yet Mary's son existed *before* Mary, for this is the eternal Son of God who, as the Nicene Creed declares, is "very God of very God." Having the eternal nature of God, the Son comes by the Spirit from the Father, never ceasing to be the Mighty God yet truly becoming what he was

not: a humble human creature. Jesus—truly God and truly human.

As Leo I (400–461) wrote in a letter, commenting on the Son's incarnation, "What he did was to enhance humanity not diminish deity. That self-emptying of his, by which the invisible revealed himself visible and the Creator and Lord of all things elected to be reckoned among mortals, was a drawing-near in mercy not a failure in power." From the womb of Mary comes the savior-king, whose "kingdom will never end." May we, like Mary, respond as the "Lord's servant," willing to trust the Almighty God who has loved his creation enough to dwell in it by becoming this man, thus bringing new life into the world. His full divinity and full humanity proclaim his power, and he tells us, "Do not be afraid."

Consider Luke 1:26–38.

What strikes you most in Gabriel's message? How do you desire to respond to Jesus and to the beautiful paradox of his incarnation?

The Invitation of Incarnation

RASOOL BERRY



*Blessed is she who
has believed that the
Lord would fulfill his
promises to her!*

LUKE 1:45

Few interruptions in life are as disruptive as travel, especially with the fatigue and morning sickness that often accompany early pregnancy. Mary’s journey from Nazareth to the hills of Judea was neither easy nor safe. Still, emboldened by her faith but also in need of support, Mary braved the trek pregnant, poor, and probably perplexed. Why choose to go at all?

Gabriel had told Mary that her relative Elizabeth was also expecting a child—a miracle for a woman of her advanced age. Recognizing that Elizabeth was the only person on earth who might understand what she was going through, Mary went to her. And when she arrived, Elizabeth offered the exact affirmation Mary needed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you

will bear!” Elizabeth praised Mary for her response of faith. With those words, I imagine Mary’s fears tied to her unexpected pregnancy and its unknown consequences for her life faded into greater faith.

Elizabeth’s encouragement reminded Mary that the Lord’s interruption of her plans was also an invitation—not only to carry and give birth to Immanuel, “God with us,” but also to engage in a deeper sense of community, “us with us.” Heartened by Elizabeth’s blessing, Mary responded with a song of praise. And she reflected on this invitation into interdependence in the closing words of her Magnificat: “He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever” (ESV). In her rejoicing, Mary meditated on how the very same God who “spoke to our fathers” all the way back to Abraham had now spoken to her and to Elizabeth.

Mary believed in “God with us,” and she said yes when Gabriel appeared to her. But her faith still needed nurturing. The Incarnation meant a major interruption in Mary’s life; it was wonderful, yes, but it was also weighty. Something was happening to her that had never happened before in the history of the world, and she needed support and help to accept and prepare for it.

So she turned to faithful Elizabeth. We can only imagine how strengthening it was for Mary to hear Elizabeth’s words of blessing. In fact, I’d argue that we would not have Mary’s Magnificat without Elizabeth’s Encouragement.

That’s the power of interdependence, of faith in community. In our individualistic society, opening ourselves up to be blessed by others is often difficult. We are conditioned to consider the possibilities of harm more than the potential helpfulness of community. But the truth is that, like Mary, we all need Elizabeth-like encouragement. The Incarnation is an interruption and an invitation to know “God with us” and also to embrace “us with us.”

Contemplate Luke 1:39–56.

What truths do you see in this passage about Jesus—God with us? How do Elizabeth’s words and her role in Mary’s life speak to you, too, about the “us with us” nature of faith?

God of Mercy and Power

MADISON N. PIERCE

*Praise be to the
Lord, the God of
Israel, because he has
come to his people
and redeemed them.*

LUKE 1:68

W e humans do not hold mercy and power in tension well.

Those who gain power often enjoy it and tend to seek more, while those who are gracious tend to surrender power (or have it taken from them). Undoubtedly there are exceptions, but by and large, we know and can observe that this balance is not easy to achieve. But unlike us, God is somehow *both* the most powerful and the most merciful, perfect in his display of each.

We see God's gracious might highlighted in several ways in this story about John the Baptist's birth and early days. In fact, this theme of gracious might is hidden in plain sight for us English readers. We learn that Elizabeth wants to name the boy John in keeping with the message that Gabriel gave to Zechariah (Luke 1:13). Those around her are surprised; this didn't cohere with the custom of naming a child after someone in the family. So



why John (*Yohanan* in Hebrew)? It means “God is gracious,” and this boy will proclaim God’s gracious works on behalf of the whole world.

Zechariah has been unable to speak since the day he learned his wife would have a child. But as soon as he writes the boy’s name, his speech is restored, and he erupts in praise. Through this sign, the people know this boy is special. They ask one another, *What will he be?*

But Zechariah casts their gaze in the right direction. Yes, the boy has a special role, but *the Lord* is to be praised. The powerful Lord of all “will come to us,” Zechariah says, and will be in the midst of his people.

But the Lord’s display of power will not be oppressive. Instead, it will be liberative. The Lord has “raised up a horn of salvation” in order to “show mercy to our ancestors” and to “rescue us.”

The idea of God showing mercy is linked to the idea of God’s people being in sin. Like their ancestors who received similar prophecies (1 Sam. 2:10; Mic. 7:20; Ezek. 16:60), they deserve punishment but they receive an outpouring of grace.

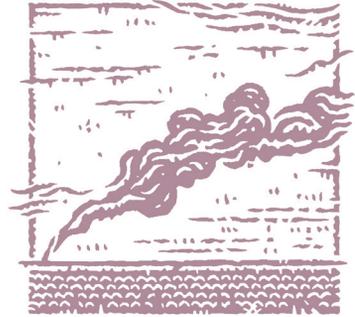
Why does God do this? So we can serve him. This is a gift so that we might truly experience “God with us.” The Song of Zechariah promises forgiveness of our sins and illumination to guide us on the “path of peace.” As Luke continues his gospel, he will return to these themes many times, highlighting how the coming of the Messiah ushers in restoration and justice—true and lasting peace.

Meditate on Luke 1:57-80.

Where in this passage do you see the mighty power of God? Where do you see the mercy and grace of God? Pray, expressing your response to God.

Unfather Christmas

J. D. PEABODY



*And he gave him
the name Jesus.*

MATTHEW 1:25

Joseph's biggest claim to fame is who he wasn't. We know him as "not the real dad" of Jesus. Matthew emphasizes how little Joseph had to do with the unfolding redemption story, from Mary's pregnancy to the location of Christ's birth to the events that led to the family's flight into Egypt.

Scripture also renders Joseph conspicuously silent. He utters not one recorded word. As a result, Joseph is often either glossed over or is the subject of our conjecture. We want to know more. Yet perhaps Joseph's non-contribution is the very thing God would have us remember.

This man's most significant role is his apparent lack of one. His diminished involvement encapsulates a central tenet of the gospel: Salvation

belongs to God alone. Joseph's story reminds us we are not the orchestrators of our own rescue. The angel didn't tell Joseph, "Here's what God wants, so now go make it happen." He said, essentially, "Here's what *God* has made happen, and here's how to receive that truth."

It would have been understandable for Joseph to resent life not unfolding as he'd expected. But rather than focus on all he was being asked to give up, Joseph made room for a greater reality: This child was the Promised One, the key to God's redemption of the whole world. And if Jesus was truly good news for all people, that included him. The bigger plan for humanity also meant salvation for him personally.

So it's worth noting that Joseph's silence is broken with a single word. He's not quoted directly, but we're told he spoke it, and the word was *Jesus*. Joseph alone had the honor of giving the child a name that means "God saves."

Matthew links this name with the text in Isaiah identifying the Messiah as Immanuel—God with us. *Jesus* and *Immanuel* are virtually interchangeable names; God's presence makes our salvation possible, and our salvation allows us to stand in his presence.

For Joseph, assigning this name was more than following the angel's

orders. It was a declaration. The man who says nothing speaks loudly here. In his helplessness, when his world went sideways, Joseph's response was *Jesus. God saves.*

As events unfolded over which he had little control, Joseph could personalize the words of the prophet: *Immanuel. God is with me.* And when he would soon face such peril that he and his family would have to run for their lives, Joseph carried the truth in his arms. *Jesus. God saves. Immanuel. God goes with us.*

Though the space allotted to Joseph in the narrative is small, maybe that's a good thing. In Joseph, we can see our own smallness and remember that salvation belongs to the Savior who is with us to the end.

Reflect on Matthew 1:18–25.

How does Joseph's act of naming Jesus speak to you? What do you imagine this name meant to Joseph as he took care of the infant Jesus?

A Flock of Shepherds

J. D. PEABODY

*And there were
shepherds living out
in the fields nearby,
keeping watch over
their flocks at night.*

LUKE 2:8

When my wife, Karin, was in preschool, she played a miniature Mary in a living Nativity scene. While it was an adorable idea, the reality of having live animals stand next to a three-year-old proved terrifying for her. She cried hysterically, wanting no part of the whole thing. To console her, her father stepped into the scene and lay down on the ground between her and the beasts, forming a human barricade so that his daughter felt secure. He covered himself entirely with straw so visitors to the living Nativity were none the wiser.

It's a striking image of what shepherding is all about. In Luke 2, the shepherds are “keeping watch over their flocks at night”—highlighting the very real dangers of darkness. It was when thieves and predators posed the greatest threat. So the shepherds placed themselves in harm's way, protecting their sheep with their very lives.



But in Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth, the shepherds also turn out to be sheep. That first Christmas, the Lord revealed himself as the Good Shepherd in the story, caring for the shepherds themselves as part of his own flock.

Consider how much God’s attention to the shepherds resembles David’s description of God as a shepherd in Psalm 23. God supplied the shepherds’ need—a need they may not have even articulated. He quieted their souls through the angel’s words: “Do not be afraid.” He led them on paths of righteousness straight to the manger. He showed he was with them in the most humble and relatable of ways: as a baby in a manger. He restored their souls with a message of hope and belonging—a message that turned out exactly “as they had been told.” He filled their cup to overflowing with praise “for all the things they had heard and seen.” He not only met their need; he anointed their heads

with the oil of joy. He showed them goodness and mercy that would no doubt stay with them all the days of their life.

I need that kind of care. As a pastor, I’m grateful for this reminder that shepherds are also part of the flock. I’m thankful for a Savior who knows his skittish sheep well, who laid his life all the way down in the hay, placing himself between us and every danger.

And I’m grateful that when our anxious souls need tending, the Lord still speaks the word of peace on earth in the recognizable voice of our Good Shepherd. That is indeed good news of great joy for all the people.

Contemplate Luke 2:1–21.

Optional: Also read Psalm 23 and John 10:2–4, 11, 14.

How do you see God’s care—and God’s character—in the account of the shepherds? What does this emphasize for you about Jesus?

Seeing Jesus, They Knew

KRISTIE ANYABWILE

Parenting is hard, and first-time parenting brings an added weight of difficulty. Everything is new—from feeling those first flutters of life in the womb to holding and seeing your child for the first time to the first bath, first feedings, first words, first steps. There are so many *firsts*!

Imagine what it was like for Joseph and Mary, traveling with their newborn from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. The trip would've taken a few hours on foot. In faithful obedience, they traveled for the first time as brand-new parents, participating in the custom of dedicating themselves and their child back to God.

All went according to custom until the righteous and devout Simeon arrived. He'd been waiting for the

deliverance of Israel, and entering the temple courts, he experienced a first. In that moment, God fulfilled his promise that Simeon would live to see the Messiah. Seeing the infant Jesus, he *knew*.

And Simeon didn't just see him—Simeon *held* him. In that moment, Simeon tangibly understood that God's salvation foretold by the prophets would be not only global in scale but also intimate and personal. Salvation itself was embodied in the cooing and wiggling infant in his arms. As Simeon worshiped and spoke of God's salvation, Mary and Joseph marveled, likely remembering the angels' instruction that they should name their child Jesus, a name that spoke of God's salvation.



*For my eyes have seen
your salvation, which
you have prepared in
the sight of all nations.*

LUKE 2:30–31

While Simeon spoke to Mary, Anna came up to them and confirmed Simeon's prophetic song of worship by praising God herself. For decades, Anna's entire life had centered on worshiping God, praying, and fasting. Seeing Jesus, Anna *knew*. She knew this was the child they'd been awaiting for the redemption of God's people, so she spoke of Jesus to all who would listen. The promised light for the nations had arrived.

In Mary and Joseph, in Simeon and Anna, we see snapshots of what devotion to God and righteous living looks like. We see obedience and faith, discipline and dedication, anticipation and worship. They saw Immanuel. They held Immanuel. They knew Immanuel. They spoke of Immanuel.

As we celebrate Immanuel this Advent, let's walk in faithful obedience like Mary and Joseph. Let's practice being devoted, upright, and worshipful like Simeon. Let's pray, fast, and speak of Jesus to all who will hear like Anna. There is redemption in no other name.

Ponder Luke 2:22–40.

What's most compelling to you about the stories of Simeon and Anna? How does their example—and that of Mary and Joseph—encourage and inspire you this Christmas Eve?

DECEMBER

25

CHRISTMAS DAY

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

ISAIAH 9:6-7

Read Isaiah 7:14 and 9:1-7

Celebrate Jesus' birth with joy.









Light of the World, Hope of the Nations

RASOOL BERRY

Throughout history, humans have looked up to the night sky to search for signs from above. That proclivity has led many to worship the stars and celestial bodies. In Genesis 1, the terms *sun* and *moon* are not used; they are instead described as the greater and lesser lights (v. 16), likely to avoid the names commonly evoked in idol worship in the ancient Near East.

Yet God would soon use that same human search for signs in the stars to reveal his covenant: He commanded Abraham to look up and witness the

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child . . . and they bowed down and worshiped him.

MATTHEW 2:10–11

innumerable stars, foreshadowing the blessing of his progeny to the nations. Hundreds of years later, however, when the children of Abraham were exiled to Babylon, it appeared that the darkness of the nations had devoured the light. Hope appeared to be lost.

But in Matthew 2, we find an unexpected redemptive reversal! We meet the Magi—from an elite class known for astrology (and idolatry) and likely from the same region where God’s people had been exiled—whose study of the skies led them to faith in the promise of Abraham. *Had the stories passed down from Daniel and the exiles in Babylon finally come to pass?* Likely venturing on the same 900-mile journey from ancient Babylon to Jerusalem that the returning exiles had made so many years before, the Magi sought an answer to a single question: “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?”

Their inquiry revealed a deep spiritual yearning: “We saw his star . . . and have come to worship him.” Their journey was a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophetic vision and a foretaste of

what was to come: “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (49:6, ESV). The “lesser light” of the star pointed the Magi to the “greater light” in the little town of Bethlehem, bright enough to enlighten the nations. The light came into the world, and the darkness did not conquer it.

The light of the Epiphany—the appearance of God in the arrival of Jesus—continues to offer hope to all nations groping in the dark for divine truth. And as the Magi show us, this is news too good to keep to ourselves! These wise men from the East continue to teach us that we too must travel far and wide to share the news that Jesus is the Light of the World and the hope of the nations. As Scripture tells us: “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

Reflect on Matthew 2:1–12 and Isaiah 49:6; 60:3.

What does the visit of the Magi reveal about Jesus’ identity and purpose? How is the Spirit prompting you to respond to Jesus, the Light of the World?