

The Promised King

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 December 2016

Preacher: Martin Ayers

- [0 : 0 0] Thanks, Alan, for reading. Good morning, St. Silas. There's a few people I don't know here. I'm Martin Ayers. I'm the minister here. It's great to have you with us.
- And it would be great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open at Luke chapter 1 as we look together at that passage that Alan read for us. As always, there's an outline inside the notice sheet if you find that helpful to see where we're going with it.
- And we need to ask for God's help as we turn to his word. So let's pray. Let me lead us in a prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of your son.
- Thank you for the opportunity this morning to step back to that moment when Gabriel visited Mary. And so we pray that your spirit will work powerfully in each one of us now, that you will give us heads that can understand your word and hearts that are willing to change and follow you.
- In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, when we hear news, we respond differently depending on our perspective on that news. I had an example of that just recently.
- [1 : 0 9] And it was that there was this earthquake in New Zealand. There was another earthquake on the South Island. Now, there's a couple at St. Silas who have recently moved back from New Zealand, from Christchurch.
- So I guess for them, that news came as a very real shock. They've got friends, perhaps family over there, who have been affected. And so they feel very strongly a burden for the news about this earthquake.
- Others of us may never have been to New Zealand. And we see that on the news, that item. We feel sad about it. But it's hard to feel huge compassion because it's so far away from us.
- So our perspective is different on what happened. Then there was the news story of the three cows. I don't know whether you saw this. They were left stranded on a small island in a field.
- People concerned for them when the helicopters kind of showed them. And then they survived. It was reported as a miraculous survival. It wasn't actually a miracle. It was just improbable. But what happened was Farmer Milton managed to rescue them along with 14 other cows.
- [2 : 1 5] And when you hear that, you think, that's lovely, isn't it, about the cows? In fact, the way it was reported on the media, it was almost as though the journalists were really glad there'd been an earthquake because the story was so nice about the cows.
- So the perspective changed. Well, Luke's gospel is another momentous news story. If you just look back up the page in Luke chapter 1, you can see that Luke begins his account.
- Dr. Luke, he says that he's writing an orderly account. Verse 3, he says, I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning. I decided to write an orderly account for you.

And now he sets out for us what happened to Mary in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Elizabeth is pregnant, carrying John the Baptist. But as we had it read, I wonder how did you respond as it was being read?

You might have thought, this is too far away from me to have an effect on me. You might have thought, I just can't believe people still believe this stuff.

[3 : 21] Come on. A virgin birth? An angel? Or it might be that you felt a wave of nostalgia. That's how I feel when I hear that read.

Having grown up in a school where we'd have had a carol service, I remember my school friend, Gavin MacDonald, reading that reading. It has this nostalgia about it as we approach Christmas.

But Luke wants us to respond differently to all of that. And the first thing he wants us to do is to rejoice. That's our first point. Rejoice at a God who comes down to a village.

Verse 26 would be absolutely stunning if it wasn't so familiar to many of us. Just have a look again at verse 26. 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 Bible explains for us that just as there is a physical universe that we can see, God has also made a spiritual universe. And we can't see it, but it's very real.

[4 : 34] And there are these awesome creatures in it, angels. And we find that hard to believe, many of us, because we have never seen an angel. But the Bible doesn't ask us to believe that angels appear all the time.

For people to see an angel is very rare. It's even, it's very rare in the Bible for someone to see an angel. Not just rare today. So this is God's way of signaling that what's about to happen is of cosmic importance.

Gabriel has appeared before. 500 years earlier, God sent Gabriel to Daniel. But Daniel was a hugely important man. And the message that Gabriel brought from God to this really important leader, Daniel, was about the future and the rise and the fall of empires across the world.

Here, God's people have been waiting for news from God. In fact, for any word from God. For 450 years. And then Gabriel visits again to break the silence.

Where does he go? To this complete unknown in a remote backwater village in northern Israel. To a maiden.

[5 : 48] She's probably about 15 years old. And Luke wants us to feel the shock of that. So he puts this account straight after Gabriel's visit to Zechariah.

Why? Zechariah, earlier in chapter 1, was a priest. He was in Jerusalem. He was serving at the temple. And more than that, he went inside the most holy place.

Just have a look back at verse 10. We didn't have it read. Chapter 1, verse 10. When the time came for the burning of incense, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right-hand side of the altar of incense. Now this is the epicenter of God's presence in the world.

And Zechariah is a senior priest. And it's this time of prayer and worship. You see that? Everyone's around praying. If you were looking for God in the first century, that is where you'd go.

[6 : 46] But if you went there, and just went there, you'd miss him. Because that was just a prelude. God is now announcing his own arrival into the world, and he's sending this esteemed messenger angel to a 15-year-old girl in a remote northern town.

It's extraordinary. Just imagine if it came on the news that Donald Trump was going to come on his first state visit to Britain, and he was going to arrive by helicopter, and the paparazzi didn't know where he'd be.

So they're going to different places for pictures. Where would they go? Well, some of them would go to Buckingham Palace, wouldn't they, in case he went there first. Others might wait at Downing Street. Others at Holyrood, Edinburgh Castle, Balmoral, the Top Hotels, the Ritz, the Savoy.

And then imagine that you're at Gregg's on Govan Road, getting yourself a pasty, and Donald Trump walks in to Gregg's. The world would be shocked, wouldn't they?

The most powerful man in the world about to be, and he's chosen Govan, and he's gone to Gregg's. Well, that's just a picture of what's going on as God sends Gabriel to Mary.

[7 : 59] And it's a snapshot of something wonderful about the character of God. When God leaves the comfort of heaven where angels worship him to take flesh and become a man, he comes for the lowly.

He's a down-to-earth God. He's a God for everyone. I was listening to Radio 2 recently, and there was a guy on the phone in on Radio 2, and he was asked about hobbies.

And he said one of his hobbies was being an extra in films. Whenever he finds there's an opportunity to be an extra, he applies, and he turns up on the sets. And he's being asked about that. And he was asked if he'd ever met anyone famous.

And he said, you know, the best star I've met was Kevin Costner. He said, sometimes you see the stars, but they don't really want anything to do with you because you're just an extra. He said, Kevin Costner was amazing.

He came to see us. He checked we had everything that we needed. He talked to us. You really felt like he cared about you. And Ken Bruce on the radio said, what a nice guy. One of the good guys, Kevin Costner.

[9 : 00] And we love that, don't we? It's a really nice thing to hear about somebody who has become very famous, but remembered that they're only human at the end of the day. They're not above anybody else.

They're just an ordinary person. So we love hearing about that. Well, this is not like that at all, you see, because God has every right to think of himself as far greater than us.

He has every right to want nothing to do with us. We're creatures. He is the uncreated creator. As if to emphasize that, did you notice what Gabriel called God twice?

In verse 32 and in verse 35, God is the most high. The most high. So that's why verse 26, he's meant to smack us right between the eyes as we read that.

In the sixth month, God, the Lord, the most high, sent the angel, Gabriel, the awesome, terrifying warrior messenger, the one who could tell Daniel the future, to Nazareth, an insignificant town in Galilee, to a virgin girl.

[10 : 12] He came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all, and his shelter was a stable, and his cradle was a stall. I don't know what you think about that, but I think that should give us joy.

It means that whatever your life story is, however other people might have mistreated you, however underachieving you might feel or disappointed you might feel, the God who made you is completely for you.

If you feel that you're a failure, you feel that you're insignificant, God is for you. He is radically involved and radically interested in the little details of our seemingly very ordinary, flawed lives.

He came for us and to do that he had to become one of us and experience the muck of ordinary life. The writer Dorothy Sayers wrote this, reflecting on God becoming a man in this way.

She wrote this, for whatever reason God chose to make man as he is, limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death, he had the honesty and the courage to take his own medicine.

[11 : 24] Whatever game he is playing with his creation, he has kept his own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that he has not exacted from himself. He has himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair and death.

When he was a man, he played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile. This is how Christmas transforms your view of God.

That's our first point, rejoice at a God who comes down to a village. Secondly, Luke wants us to recognize a baby who was born to rule.

We can get preoccupied with the angel, but the angel is just the messenger and his message, like the whole Bible's message, is all about the baby. Mary is greatly troubled.

Let's pick things up in verse 30. 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.

[12 : 45] Now when a new baby is born, people want to know lots of details, don't they? Michael and Susan Rita Harris became grandparents on Thursday. It was great news, great joy.

But the message they got on Thursday was quite brief. Susan told me on Thursday, I found out I'd become a grandma. I'm not sure when the baby was born. It might have been yesterday. It might have been today.

We don't have any other details. Ruth Downs explained it's because it's her son rather than her daughter getting in touch. I remember when we had our first child, Hannah, and I texted close family to say, all fine, baby born, everyone is okay.

And I immediately had a phone message from my sister-in-law. She said, thanks Martin for your message and congratulations, but you have left out some important details for us. Like, what is her name and how much does she weigh and does she have any hair and what color is it?

People want details, don't they? It's the same when there's a famous baby born and with Prince George and Princess Charlotte, you can go online and you can find out all kinds of trivia about them.

[13 : 52] You can find out about how they relate to their grandma and, you know, all sorts of stuff about what they're like, about their great-grandma, what does George call the queen, there's all this stuff. But there's no trivia in Gabriel's message.

Did you see what Mary is told in verse 31? She's told what to call him. Isn't that remarkable? Don't mothers get to name their own children?

Well, they do. But you name a child because they're under your authority. And Mary can't name Jesus because Jesus isn't under her authority. It's the same for us with Jesus.

You see, you don't go through life and then think, I've got this need. Let me add Jesus onto my life. and I can control him. That's not how it works.

No, you invite Jesus into your life and he controls you. And if that left Mary daunted, just have a look at verse 32. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

[14 : 59] This is a divine baby. Christ by highest heaven adored. Christ the everlasting Lord. And he is long awaited.

He is so long awaited. He's been long awaited since God promised to Adam and Eve that one of her offspring would come and crush Satan's head.

This baby has been awaited since God promised to Abraham that through his seed, through one of his descendants, this broken world would be put right. He's been long awaited since Jacob, the father of Israel, in Genesis 49, blessed his sons.

And as he turned to Judah, he got this vision from God of one coming in Judah's line. And he said, The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs.

And the obedience of the nations is his. This child has been long awaited since the prophet Balaam received a breathtaking vision from God in Numbers 24, where he said this, I see him, but not now.

[16:06] I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob. A scepter will rise out of Israel. The child has been long awaited since God promised to David, son of Jesse, that a descendant in his royal line would reign forever.

Since Isaiah received a vision, 700 BC, of a sign of virgin birth and foretold, A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse. From his root, a branch will bear fruit.

The spirit of the Lord will rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and of understanding. This broken world has been waiting, yearning for a king who can put the world right.

And what does Gabriel say in verse 32? The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever.

And then, as if to emphasize it, his kingdom will never end. At last, he is here. So right at the heart of Christmas is the news that God's, Jesus is God's only promised eternal son.

[17:19] He's his forever king with authority over the whole world. It's so confronting, isn't it, Christmas? I mean, if this is true and you reject it, it means you are a rebel against the true king of the world.

And yet, Gabriel's message is that if you will turn to this king and accept his rule and his offer of forgiveness, then Gabriel's message here is the best news that you could ever hear.

For here at last is the one who will mend our broken world and will mend our broken lives, who will bring us back to God and who will share his kingdom with us forever.

Here is one you could set your hope on and know that you would never be disappointed in him. So let me ask, are you willing to recognize that Jesus is who Gabriel says that he is?

So what's our response to this news, to this God and this baby? Well, that's our third point. Luke wants us to respond like a girl who knew her place. See, Mary starts with open-minded questioning.

[18:31] In verse 34, how will this be, Mary asked the angel, since I'm a virgin? And Gabriel gives her answers to that. It's very different to what happened to Zechariah when he was told earlier in chapter 1 by Gabriel that Elizabeth would bear his child.

Just have a look at verse 18 and see what happened to him. Zechariah asked the angel, how can I be sure of this? And for that doubt, he gets struck dumb until the baby is born.

So if you ever meet an angel, you better hope you haven't caught him on a bad day. No, it can't be that, can it? So why are Mary and Zechariah treated so differently for what looks on the face of it like two very similar questions to Gabriel?

There must be a healthy way to doubt and an unhealthy way to doubt. Perhaps behind Zechariah's questioning, there was closed-minded unbelief.

Come on, God, how can this be at this stage of my life? But for Mary, there was an open-mindedness. There was a questioning, but there was a willingness to believe.

[19 : 47] So what does that mean for us? Well, perhaps you have got doubts. Doubts about God, about Jesus, about Christmas, about the Bible. Well, don't drift away if you've got doubts.

If you've got doubts, Luke's gospel was written for you. Mary had her doubts as well. But let me ask you, are your doubts open-minded doubts?

Are you willing, like Mary, to seek answers to your questions about God and listen to the answers? Or are you in danger of having already made up your mind so that you won't believe this?

If you're someone seeking answers, in January, we're going to run this Life Explode course on Sunday evenings. It'd be a chance to come along and ask questions and have the space to think more about the Christian faith.

If you've grown up in Glasgow or anywhere in the Western world, we've been trained every day of our educational lives and we're trained by our media to believe that anything miraculous is impossible.

[20 : 58] But Mary, think about Mary, she was a Jew. Everything in her education and background had trained her to believe that God could not possibly become a human being. I remember being at a Muslim Christian event a little while ago and the Muslim speaker was very honest.

He said, we believe as Muslims it is impossible for God to become a man. Mary, as a Jewish believer, that's exactly how she would have thought as a first century Jew.

So here's the point. The barriers that she faced to belief are every bit as big as the barriers you face. And yet she asks her questions with an open mind and she finds out what many of us here have found that the answers are there for us to have faith.

So in verse 37 Gabriel invites her and she invites us to trust this message. Verse 37, for no word from God will ever fail. Even the word that he loves the world enough not to turn his back but to send his son to save us.

And so next from Mary, after open-minded questioning, there is obedient surrender. Verse 38 is powerful. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered.

[22 : 23] May your word to me be fulfilled. Mary surrenders herself to the will of God. Just think about what that involved for Mary.

She's a 15-year-old girl. Everyone will think that she's either been unfaithful to Joseph or she's had sex outside marriage before she got married to him.

She'll be scandalized. In her own community, this illegitimate child will mark her for life. She has no idea yet how Joseph will react to her pregnancy.

Will she be left an outcast, abandoned by her family in poverty for life? She doesn't know. So here's the point. Mary surrenders to the will of God even though she has no idea where God is taking her.

But she says to Gabriel, literally, behold, the servant of the Lord. And God asks for the same response from every one of us. Let me ask you, is there something that you think God is asking you to do?

[23 : 31] Maybe it's to come back to him, to turn back to God through Jesus and become a Christian. For many of us here who are already Christians, you might be thinking, well, it's easier for Mary.

I've never seen an angel, so I don't know what to do. But in my experience, there are times when we do feel in the Christian life that we're being prompted by God, that he wants us to do something for him.

It might be to take a big decision, to change our job, for the sake of God's kingdom, or to move to a different place, to take on a new responsibility at church, or to give away more money.

It might be something that we don't want to do, something that frightens us. God might be prompting you to change something about your lifestyle. Whenever we choose to change our way of life because of God's commands, it is a costly decision to do that.

What is God prompting you to do for him? Well, think on that and then let Mary be your model. It's just like Abraham. He was wealthy.

[24 : 39] He was secure. God told him, get up and go. He asks, where am I going? God says, just go. I'll show you. And he leaves everything. Here is true greatness.

Everybody in this city knows who Mary is. Why? She humbled herself and surrendered to the will of God. Behold, the servant of the Lord.

There's a lot that Mary doesn't know. There's some frightening stuff that she does know, but she knows the will of God and she accepts it for her life. I wonder, could that be what we could say as a church family at St. Silas?

It's a time of change at St. Silas. I've been here coming up to a year, so newish rector, new vision, things are changing. We're in a church where there's a bit of a revolving door.

We said goodbye to people over the last few weeks who've moved away. New people are joining, which is a great joy. We're growing. That is a great joy, but sometimes that can be quite disconcerting if you've been in a church for a while and new people arrive and you don't know who everyone is anymore and things change.

[25 : 54] We don't know what God's plans are for St. Silas, for us as a church. But will you trust God enough simply to obey Him and ask that His will be done?

For all of us individually, when we turn to God, when we step out in faith and try to do things radically differently for Him, we surrender to His will for our lives even though we don't know where that will take us yet.

Can we do that? Will you do that? Well, we should be able to because it's easier for us than for Mary. We know something she didn't know at this time.

She knew what God was asking her to do for Him. She didn't yet know what God was going to do for her. You see, we know that the child she bore wasn't coming into the world to rule and conquer.

He was coming to surrender Himself to a wooden cross and at Calvary to bear the weight of her sin and your sin. So when God asks us to give up our lives to Him, we know what He has already given up for us.

[27 : 03] When Jesus asks us to hand over control, we hand over control to a man who proved His love for us by standing between us and the wrath of God against everything that we've done wrong to shield us from that wrath.

So how will you respond to Gabriel's news? This Christmas? This morning? Will you surrender to a God like this for the sake of knowing the depths of His love for you?

Will you say to God, Behold the servant of the Lord? Let's pray together. Gracious God and loving Heavenly Father, we recognize that You are the Most High, the One who commands angels and they do Your bidding.

And we rejoice in our hearts that You sent Gabriel to Nazareth, to Mary, for You are the God who came down to earth from heaven, the God of ordinary people like us, the God who opposes the proud and exalts the humble and meek.

We recognize the authority of Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, that He is Your long-awaited King and that His kingdom will never end. And so we pledge to You now that we respond like Mary did.

[28 : 29] Behold Your servants, God. May it be done to us according to Your will. Give us the strength that we need by Your Spirit to mean that every day, to orient our lives around Your will, that Your kingdom will advance for our good and Your glory.

Amen.