

Luke 1:26-38 // The Saviour who sets us free

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Preacher: Jonathan Middleton

[0:00] This one genuinely calling three goals by Rangers Football Club a Christmas miracle.! To be fair, three goals in one match.! This season does stretch the laws of nature a little bit.

Okay, last one. Missing dog reunited with family after 18 months apart. This one's heartwarming, particularly if you are a dog lover.

Prince, a white Maltese from West Lothian went missing last June. In fact, June passed the year before and turned up, would you believe it, in an Edinburgh laundrette.

Just walked into an Edinburgh laundrette a few weeks ago. STV News reported that the Dalrymple family described it as a true Christmas miracle. There he is, Prince the Dog. Oh, yeah.

Lovely. Well, what's the problem with these so-called miracles? The problem with these Christmas miracles is that they're just too small.

[1:06] Compared to the real Christmas miracles, the ones that actually changed the world, these are teeny tiny. And this morning we're going to be thinking about the three Christmas miracles in our passage. But before we get to them, Luke wants us to notice this thing first.

They come to an unlikely person in an unlikely place. Gabriel has already done one mission, telling Elizabeth that she's going to have a baby.

Now he's sent somewhere else. And where is he sent? Verse 26. Nazareth. An utterly insignificant town up north.

It's not exactly a tourist hotspot. If you tried to find a decent Airbnb in Nazareth back then, you would be searching for a long time. And if it had been a Visit Galilee brochure, it wouldn't have even made the top ten.

I was trying to think of what the Scottish equivalent might be. I came up with Arbroath. Arbroath. Yes, the location of our annual Roots weekend. It's a bit harsh on Arbroath, actually.

[2:11] But imagine the angel Gabriel landing in Arbroath next to the chip shop. And he has a look around. And he thinks to himself, no, this can't be it.

Something must be up with the heavenly satnav. But that's exactly the point. Nazareth is a backwater. So people made snide comments about it.

Can anything good come from Nazareth? And yet this is where God sends Gabriel to deliver a message to an unlikely person. A young girl, a teenager, pledged to be married to the village carpenter.

Not powerful, not prominent, not in any way influential. Just Mary. And the message she receives. The message that will change the world forever.

Three Christmas miracles. So Christmas miracle number one. It's into this context that the angel Gabriel drops by and delivers his greeting to Mary in verse 28.

[3:14] He says, Greetings you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you. And how does Mary respond? She's greatly troubled.

She's shaken. She's probably a bit scared. Which is actually a very normal response. This week I sat through a 45 minute long nativity play at school before we got to my daughter's two songs that she sang.

And I took some solace from the fact that some of the cast on stage clearly wanted to be there even less than I did. It's a performance of lights, camo, action.

Strictly the nativity. I would say loosely based on Matthew's account of the nativity, if you're being generous. A free interpretation, you might say.

It was described as glitzy, spectacularly sparkly. The nativity with glamour and sequence. Let me tell you, the angels in the Bible are not glittering with tinsel.

[4 : 19] They don't have fluffy wings. They are glorious. They're awe-inspiring. They're overwhelming. Fear is the natural human response. So Gabriel reassures her. He says, Mary, don't be afraid.

Why not? Because she has found favour with God. Not because of who she is. Not because of anything that she has done, but simply because God is gracious. God looks on ordinary people. Ordinary people like you and me.

With undeserved grace. That's who he is. And then Gabriel delivers the incredible news. You will conceive and give birth to a son.

Mary, you're gonna be a mum. Now that alone is a lot to take in for this teenage girl. Think about it. An unexpected pregnancy. A private gender reveal party of an angel.

[5 : 20] No waiting around for the 20-week scan to find out if it's a girl or a boy. And then she doesn't have a chance to catch breath because Gabriel keeps going. He tells her several astonishing things about this baby.

But one of them you'll see towers above all the rest. First, his name. We thought about that earlier with Robbie. She used to call him Jesus. There's no negotiation.

No shortlist. No humming and hawing about what name to give this child. No tug of war with Joseph as they try to decide what name to give if it's a boy or a girl.

It's Jesus. Jesus, which means the Lord saves. Now that's not just a name. That's a mission statement.

That's what he's come to accomplish and achieve. Second, his greatness. Gabriel says he will be great.

[6 : 18] Now there's an understatement if ever there was one. This child will redefine greatness. Third, his kingship.

He will be called the son of the Most High. The son of the Most High. Now Mary hears that as a first century Jew. And she hears king.

God's kings were called sons of God. This is royal language. Mary's son will be God's appointed king. David's heir. The promised ruler.

The Messiah. The Christ. Now verse 32. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And verse 33. He will reign forever. His kingdom will never end.

Every kingdom. As far as she knows. Rises and falls. Egypt. Babylon. Persia. Even Rome will fall. But this king's reign will never end.

[7 : 14] Christ isn't Jesus' surname. It's his job description. It's his title. Now everything so far sounds like this is going to be the greatest king imaginable.

But then Gabriel goes even farther. And this is where the ground really begins to shake beneath Mary's feet. Because fourth, God becomes man.

Just look with me again at what verse 35 says. 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. David was called a Son of God. Israel's kings were called Sons of God.

But not like this. This isn't symbolism. This isn't metaphor. This isn't merely a title. This is uniqueness. Jesus is the Son of God in a completely unique way.

[8 : 20] And that word overshadow. That word overshadow is carefully chosen. It is loaded with meaning. In the Bible it's a word that's used when God's presence filled the tabernacle, the tent in the desert.

When the glory of God came down to dwell among his people. The presence of God so overwhelming that even Moses could not enter the tent. That is what overshadows Mary.

Gabriel is saying the God who once filled the tent in the wilderness is now coming to dwell in human flesh. This is the miracle of miracles.

The Christmas miracle. Second Christmas miracle. The virgin birth. In fact, I've got more to say in the first one first.

Bear with me. So this is the Christmas miracle. God became man. Not ceasing to be God. Not pretending to be human.

[9 : 26] Fully God. Fully man. From the moment of conception to the straw of a manger. This is the creator stepping into creation.

The divine author himself writing himself into the story. It's beyond what Mary expected. It's beyond what we can wrap our heads around.

And that's okay. It's okay to be in awe at this. Have you ever seen Charlie Brown's Christmas? I was trying to persuade my family to watch it for a Friday night Christmas movie.

I was overruled on this occasion. But there's a scene where Charlie Brown asks, Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about? Well, this is it, Charlie Brown.

God became man. And that truth isn't finally given to be dissected by us, but to be marveled at. It's not for us to master, but to worship the fullness of God in the fullness of man.

[10:33] This is the first and greatest of the Christmas miracles. Now we'll come on to miracle number two, the virgin birth. You know those glossy holiday brochures?

You sometimes see the Seychelles, the Maldives, the endless white sand, the palm trees swing, the turquoise waters like that. Little wooden huts with private decking looks like paradise.

And if you look at it and you think, yes, that, that is where I need to be when it's like that outside in Glasgow. But you know, sometimes the reality doesn't live up to the promise.

You hear these stories sometimes, don't you? Someone books the trip and it's the one week in the year when the heavens open, pouring rain sideways, wind, the whole thing's soggy, a week trapped inside.

The promise and the reality don't match up. Maybe you can think of experiences in your own life like that, the lived reality not matching up to what you've been led to believe.

[11:37] I think Mary might be having one of those moments right here. You see, Gabriel's just given her the most amazing news that any human being has ever received. And yet, down on the ground from her perspective, the path ahead looks anything but rosy.

Mary is not naive. She knows biology. She knows what's humanly possible. Look with me again at verse 34.

She asks quite reasonably, How will this be since I am a virgin? Perhaps she's thinking back to that chat that she's had with her mother about the birds and the bees or the Christmas store or however her mother puts it to her.

Perhaps she's thinking about Joseph and the marriage bed that hasn't been touched yet. She's basically saying, Gabriel, look, this sounds amazing.

But you do realize how human reproductive biology works down here, don't you? How's that going to work? And so then Gabriel drops it.

[12:48] She will conceive by the Holy Spirit. This is not man's doing. This is God's doing. And what Gabriel's saying here to Mary is that we're not dealing with a God for whom things like that are a problem.

We're dealing with a God who defines what is possible. The God who made the world out of nothing. The God who makes the impossible possible. Maybe some of us here need to hear that. Very particularly this morning. To take hold of that truth, to reappropriate that truth for our lives. We're dealing with the God for whom nothing is impossible. So, you know, we hit those moments, don't we?

The knot in the relationship. The mountainous obstacle ahead. The situation that we just can't seem to untangle or get our heads around.

We're overwhelmed by it. We can see there's no way, humanly speaking, through this. There's just no way. Or are we forgetting that this is the God for whom all things is possible.

[14:01] God is not limited by our limits. We can bring it before the Lord in prayer. The God who spoke the galaxies into being is not short of options.

It's not unbounded by human constraints. So Mary will conceive and give birth a work of the Holy Spirit. And this isn't some last minute plot twist.

But the fulfillment of a centuries old promise. It's up on the screen. Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son.

This, then, is the beginning of God's rescue mission. The mission, the rescue mission that's been unfolding since before eternity passed.

It's now moving into human history. And what's more, the virgin birth tells us two really big things. Firstly, the virgin birth tells us that we are utterly lost.

[15:04] Humanity can't save itself. No moral striving, no clever plan, no self-improvement scheme can rescue us.

Human gene pool simply cannot deliver a savior on its own. We are utterly dependent on God's grace to intervene. And do notice how this flies in the face of the Santa Claus gospel.

It's making a list. He's checking it twice. He's going to find out he's been naughty or nice. Santa Claus is coming to town. It's catchy slash annoying.

It's everywhere. It's basically anti-gospel. Be good. This is the Santa Claus message essentially. Be good and you'll be rewarded. Be bad and you'll get what you deserve. The moral scoreboard of life. Isn't that what many people around us think that Christianity is all about? A moral scoreboard. Good people go to heaven, bad people go to hell. Try harder, do better, sort yourself out, that sort of thing.

[16:13] The reality is no matter how outwardly good we look, no matter how bad we are, we're all in the same boat, spiritually speaking.

Spiritually speaking, we're all lost. We're morally lost. We can't fix ourselves. But the good news is that God steps in and a virgin birth is God's way of saying, you cannot climb your way up to me.

So I'm going to come down to you. Secondly, the virgin birth tells us that we are profoundly loved. God could have stayed distant and left us to our own devices, left us to our own fate, but he didn't. He steps into our world, into our darkness, into our humanity. The creator became a creature, the one who made the stars, takes up residence in a feeding trough.

Fully God so he can save. Fully human so he can represent you. And Luke underscores this next line.

[17:26] Nothing will be impossible with God. Nothing will be impossible with God. I find this really striking. Luke only uses this phrase here and in one other place in his gospel.

In chapter 18 with the rich young ruler. A man who thought he'd ticked all the boxes on Santa's nice list, but couldn't give up his wealth.

The disciples say, well, if he can't be saved, then what about us? What are we going to do? What chance do we have? What is impossible with man is possible with God.

And Jesus, he's saying that on the way to the cross. He's saying that while he's about to make the impossible possible there at the cross.

In other words, salvation is not a human achievement. It's a divine miracle. The life that began in Mary's womb will end on the cross.

[18:37] By his death, he will give his life for our sin. He opens up the way for us to come to God. And so this miracle, the miracle in Mary's womb, leads us to the final miracle.

The miracle of faith. I suppose as Christians, when we think of Christmas, we tend to think of the two big headline miracles.

The incarnation, the virgin birth. But here's a third miracle that's sitting right here in the passage. And Martin Luther reckoned it's the greatest of the three.

He said this, The virgin birth is a mere trifle for God. That God should become man. That's a greater miracle.

But the greatest of all is that Mary believed. That's the Christmas miracle we often skip. But we shouldn't.

[19:36] Because Mary shows us exactly what faith in Jesus actually looks like. And there's four things here that she shows us. Firstly, Mary's faith is thoughtful.

She engages her mind. Before Mary ever says yes, she thinks. Verse 29 says she was troubled and wondered.

Or your translation might have tried to discern what the greeting meant. She doesn't switch off her brain. She weighs it.

Ponders it. She asks questions. Christian faith isn't blind faith. It's not stop thinking.

Just believe. Mary shows us that faith engages the mind. It's not the absence of reason. It's reason that's submitted to God's revelation.

[20:41] And if you're here and you're exploring the Christian faith, then that really matters. Mary gives you permission to think. Secondly, Mary's faith is grounded in God's word.

What finally persuades her? God's word. At the end of the day, God speaks through the angel Gabriel. And Mary believes.

Now, I'm guessing that for most of us, we won't experience meeting an angel in our kitchen. But we are given the same reliable word of God in the scriptures.

Faith is trusting the words that God has spoken. Now, notice the contrast then with Zechariah, who we thought about last week. Her posture of faith versus his posture of doubt and unbelief. He asks for proof and is struck silent. Mary asks, how? And the angel gives her something concrete, something tangible.

[21 : 50] So just look at verse 36. Your cousin Elizabeth is six months pregnant, even though everyone thought she was too old. And this alone isn't proof of a virgin birth, but it is evidence that God is living and active and doing wonderful things in the world.

Faith is not believing without evidence. It's trusting God on the basis of what he's already done and what he's revealed of himself. Thirdly, Mary's faith is relational.

Christian faith isn't simply believing facts about God. It's entrusting yourself to him. I am the Lord's servant, Mary says.

That's relational language. She trusts who God is, not just what he says. Faith is always personal. Surrendered to God.

Have you made that step for yourself yet? Do you know Jesus personally? Fourthly, Mary's faith is costly and courageous.

[23 : 10] Now, just put yourself in her shoes, a young girl like that, a young unmarried girl. Imagine the moment that she says, may your word to me be fulfilled. That yes, that yes is going to be costly.

It's going to be deeply costly for her. Just think about what she has to do. She's going to have to go to Joseph and tell him that she's pregnant.

Just think how that conversation is going to go. That's not going to be an easy conversation. She doesn't know at this stage how he will react. He could walk away.

And if he walks, what's she left with? Who's left standing with her? Her marriage, her dreams, her aspirations for the future, her social standing, all that at risk.

All that could simply vanish in a job just because she's listened and trusted and responded with her obedience to what God is saying here. And it's a gossip, you know.

[24 : 17] Nazareth is a small town. People will talk, people will whisper. They'll assume the worst probably. Following Jesus is not always socially convenient.

Yet Mary says yes anyway. Why? Because, and this is really the heart of it, because Mary cares more about what God thinks about her than what other people think about her.

What a lesson for us. What a massive challenger is there for us, especially when we think about Christmas, the office parties, the university night site, the family gatherings, the friends who don't believe in this message.

Isn't it a costly thing to speak up for Jesus? Are we willing this Christmas to be brave in our association with this Jesus?

Whose voice matters most? And for some of us, we know the cost of that firsthand. We know the friendships that have shifted or the invitations that have thinned over the years.

[25 : 36] The groans in the room when you mention Jesus again. For others, the cost is even greater. In his book, Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus, Nabeel Qureshi said the hardest moment of his life, the hardest moment of his life was realizing that following Jesus meant breaking his parents' hearts.

He loved his parents deeply. But he loved Jesus more. And faith often comes with a cost.

Mary shows us courage, faith that risks reputation, relationships, and comfort. Here's the final thing. This is a miracle that must happen in us.

Just as God intervened to bring Christ into the world, so God must intervene to bring faith into our hearts. If you have faith in Jesus, that is a miracle.

That is a work of the Holy Spirit. The same God who worked a miracle in Mary's womb works a miracle in human hearts, the miracle of new birth.

[26 : 55] And so the Christmas invitation is this. Will you, like Mary, trust God's word? Will you entrust yourself to the Lord Jesus this Christmas?

Will you say, I am the Lord's servant? May the Lord enact a miracle in our hearts this Christmas. Amen. And let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of Christmas, that you loved us enough to come near, to step into our world in Jesus, and to do for us what we could never do for ourselves.

Help us not merely to hear these truths, but to trust them. Like Mary, give us hearts that are willing to say yes to your word, even when we don't see the whole picture, and even when obedience feels

costly, especially when obedience feels costly.

And Lord, for those who are exploring Jesus and the claims of the Christian faith, would you give clarity and courage.

[28 : 13] For those who are weary among us, would you bring reassurance and hope. And for those who believe, would you deepen our trust and strengthen our joy. Holy Spirit, would you work quietly and powerfully among us, bringing new life, renewing faith, and drawing us closer to Jesus this Christmas.

We place ourselves in your hands, trusting in your grace and your love. In Jesus' name. Amen.