

The Wonder of the Christmas Births

Series: Rediscovering the Wonder of Christmas, Part 1

Luke 1:57-2:21

Introduction: A group traveling by train through the Rocky Mountains was thrilled and visibly moved by the magnificent scenery. A woman on the train with them hardly raised her eyes from her book, and when she was asked why she said, "this is the 13th time I have crossed the mountains. The first time I could not keep the tears from rolling down my cheeks, I was so moved. But now I know it so well and have seen it so many times that I scarcely glance out of the window".

Her sense of wonder was gone, and she no longer recognized the grandeur of the breath-taking beauty around her. We have a saying that "familiarity breeds contempt." But often, "familiarity just breeds indifference." And the more we become familiar with something the less fascination we have. The newness fades and we can lose the wonder.

And that happens often at Christmas. We have heard the Christmas story over and over and slowly the wonder of what occurred some 2,000 years ago diminishes. The old, old story has just BECOME...OLD.

Dag Hammerskjold said years ago, **"If the story of Christmas is dull you can be sure the problem is not in the message but in your loss of awe and wonder at the message."**

Psychological Scientist, Clay Routledge, puts it: "At the core of it, nostalgia is seeking some wisdom from the past—that we've lost something that maybe we can rediscover. Research has found that connecting to our past also helps us feel connected in the present.

So maybe the best thing we can do this Christmas is TO LOOK BACK and: Rediscover the Wonder of Christmas. That is the title of this year's Christmas series.

The wonder of Christmas is not about Santa and bright-eyed children or winter wonderlands. The wonder of Christmas is about a God who became us, to redeem us, because He loves us.

I don't know what God is doing in your life. We may not know what the new year will bring. But I'm here to tell you that God is still moving, still active, still good, still powerful, and still does miracles. As we rediscover the wonder of Christmas in these next few weeks, it will give us courage to move forward.

PRAYER

What makes you wonder? Wonder has several meanings. One is "to doubt." It's "Hmmm, I'm not sure!" "I wonder if my flight will be on time. I wonder if my car will start."

Wonder also means "to be filled with admiration, amazement or awe!" Think of the seven, or eight wonders of the world, like the Pyramids of Giza.

Wonder also means "to think; to speculate curiously." I also wonder what God was thinking when he sent a baby to do what only He could do!

As we grow older, most of us lose some of our wonder. Along with that, our anticipation gets trampled under the weight of responsibilities, the rush of preparations, and the heaviness that comes when Christmas brings sadness.

The remedy is not getting more expensive presents, having more decorations, or inviting the right people to our parties. The remedy is stepping back enough to realize that we have lost it, and then going through a journey of recovery.

Did you know the church has a recovery program for lost wonder and anticipation leading toward Christmas. **It's called Advent**, which means "appearing." Advent looks back with wonder at Jesus' birth over two-thousand years ago, while also looking forward with anticipation to his future return.

Today, I want to talk specifically about the Wonder of the Christmas Births. Yes, you heard me right, I said births with an (s). [Faith Hill sings a great song – “A baby changes everything.” Talk about Caleb’s birth]

The Christmas story is told in narrative form by the tax collector named Matthew and by the medical doctor named Luke.

Matthew begins by giving the genealogy in ascending line from Abraham through David, through Joseph, to Jesus Christ; meaning that the Story is all about God fulfilling the promise to David of a King to rule over an everlasting Kingdom. To Matthew’s mostly Jewish audience these verses vindicate Jesus’ claim that He was King of the Jews. It is the fulfillment of God’s plan which He put into action from before the creation of the world.

In Luke’s Gospel we have the descending line, starting from Jesus and going back through David, and Abraham and Adam, to God.

Jesus was the blood descendant through Mary, and the legal descendant through Joseph – making Him perfectly qualified on both grounds to take the throne of David as the promised Messiah.

In Luke's gospel, the Christmas story is not just about one birth. **It's about two births.** The Christmas story didn’t start when the Angel appeared to Mary. It began half a year earlier and 60 miles away, when the angel Gabriel appeared in Jerusalem to a priest named Zechariah to announce the birth of a boy who would be named John, who would be a relative of Jesus, and prepare the way.

In fact, the surprising thing is that John's birth gets 24 verses, while Jesus only gets 21 verses. If we just take Jesus' birth apart from John's birth, we don't really get the whole story.

As so here is the account of how the Christmas story begins, Luke 1:5

5 In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. 6 Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. 7 But they were

childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old."

The Story does not begin, "Once upon a time," Or in a "galaxy far, far away." This Story takes place in real, historical places, involving real, historical people, in real, historical time.

It says, "In the days of Herod, king of the Jews, there was certain priest named Zacharias" (1:5); chapter 2 says, "Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus" (2:1).

A little bit later, when Gabriel appeared to Mary in verse 36 Gabriel says, ***"What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she's now in her sixth month."***

In the King James Version, Elizabeth is called Mary's cousin but the word in the original Greek can mean "cousin, kinfolk, relative" or any relationship that implies blood lines.

What we do know is that Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron, and we are told that Mary was a descendant of David; so whatever relationship they shared was on their mother's side of the family tree.

The Bible tells us in Luke 1:6 they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

We know that Zechariah was a priest, and that Elizabeth was also descended from the priestly line, and we know that they were not only childless, but they were also beyond child-bearing years.

And we also know that they were chosen for a very special assignment, to raise John. This wasn't just an; "oops we are pregnant, what now?" situation. This was part of God's plan.

Verses 8-13 goes on to say, ***"8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of incense came; all the assembled worshipers were praying outside."***

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 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.”

14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. 16 He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

18 Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years.” *[I love how he says that.]*

19 The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

In essence Gabriel is saying, **Fear Not – Just Believe, your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.**”

This makes me WONDER. What prayer is being answered. We don’t know what Elizabeth’s prayers were about getting pregnant at that stage in her life.

Just so you know, the reason that they didn’t have children was because they couldn’t have children. Are they still praying to have a child even though it’s now physically impossible?

Or is God answering a prayer that they had stopped praying years ago and had given up on. *Makes me wonder.* Be careful what you pray for and be ready when God does answers your prayer.

As far as we know Zechariah went home, not being able to speak, and conveyed the message of the angel to Elizabeth. That conversation must have been interesting. “An angel told you we are supposed to do what?”

I wonder how many blessings we forfeit because we don't believe God.

How often do we pray and then are afraid when God answers our prayer, because it's in His Timing, in His Way for His Purpose?

Mary's part of the story begins in Luke 1, verse, 26: *"In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."*

29Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. 31You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." 34"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" 35The angel answered, "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. 36Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. 37For no word from God will ever fail." 38"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her."

There are some striking similarities between what happens to Zechariah and Mary. Both are visited by the angel Gabriel. Both are made what seemed like an impossible promise involving a child.

If we compare Zechariah to Mary, we are left with a question like this. Which is harder to believe, that an older couple, well past childbearing years, can have a child or that a virgin would conceive and give birth to a son?

Both are humanly impossible, but surely the conception of Jesus is a miracle of a different order than Elizabeth getting pregnant. Yet Mary believed, and Zechariah didn't. **Zechariah wanted proof. Mary wanted understanding.**

I. If we are going to rediscover the wonder of Christmas, we must look at both births:

We tend to think of virginity only in terms of innocence and purity.

Of course, those terms would be appropriate, but her virginity did not provide an earned holiness to which God might respond with a miracle. If we think God can only work in us if we are innocent, pure, untouched, and perfect, then most of us will give up.

Mary's virginity represents the impossibility, humanly speaking, of the life of God coming forth. We need to see her virginity as a picture of the hopelessness of the situation.

And so, the angel 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.***"

"Even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to... have a child in her old age. And she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month...for no word from God will ever fail." Or even better, "nothing is impossible with God."

But then the angel went away, and Mary's life got back to normal, except that it was never normal again. And from what we're told and according to the historical record the angel, Gabriel, never showed up to Mary again.

She was a teenage girl with no explanation as to why she was pregnant, other than an angel who said that the Holy Spirit would come upon her.

I'm sure there were days when Mary was like, "Angel, you got to come down here and explain this to my mother and my father and my future husband and even my science teacher, because everybody is lookin' at me funny.

Makes me WONDER if being favored by God is a good thing.

Fortunately, Joseph had a little heads up about this from a dream he had. And then, talk about bad timing, Caesar Augustus decrees that everybody's got to

go home and register for a census. Joseph, being from the line of David, would need to return to Bethlehem.

It was at least a three-day trip, and the timing couldn't have been worse. And now, Mary the “miss favored of God”... is gonna take a donkey ride for almost 120 miles while she's very pregnant. And it takes them so long to get there... there's...No room in the inn.

It's like hey Gabriel, you didn't tell me about this part. If I'm so favored of God, and you knew this was God's plan, you should have reserved a room."

Notice the location of these two births. The first one took place at home, while the other took place far away from home.

One of the best things about bringing a new child into the world is getting to share it with your friends and family, and that is how it was with John. Jesus was born without any of Joseph's & Mary's relatives around, without any fanfare, except for some shepherds.

We read that there was rejoicing among Elizabeth's friends when John was born. But the shepherds brought joy of a different kind. It all started with the angel. He said, "I bring you good news of great joy."

So, we have not one, but two births. One took place at home, with friends and relatives in attendance; the other took place far away from home in a stable with no one there but animals and shepherds. Both were occasions of great joy and singing. Both took place in accord with Jewish law—naming and circumcising the boy on the eighth day.

I believe Luke lays these two births side by side to show us WHAT the wonders of God can teach us AND what we should do at Christmas.
1. Simply Believe.

Zechariah failed to believe that God would do what the angel promised him. That's why God hit the mute button on him, and he can't speak until his son is born. Then we saw how Mary, in contrast to that, believed that what the angel said really would take place. But with the shepherds we see another example

of faith. After the angels leave, they look at each other and say: ***“Let's go straight to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened.”***

That's the kind of faith God wants to see in us. There is no debate. There is no procrastination. They don't decide to sleep on it. They don't go to the local library for research. If you want to rediscover the wonder of Christmas, just believe. That's faith.

Scripture says that, without faith, it's impossible to please God. Faith means you say yes to all that God was doing through that baby born in a manger. Yes, he is the Savior of the world. Yes, he came to die for my sins. Yes, through Him I find forgiveness and new life. Yes, Jesus is Immanuel – God with us; God is with me and He is for me.

2. Trust and Obey.

We see obedience in Zechariah naming his son of John. We see the same obedience in Joseph and Mary. They knew God was doing something new through their son, but not so new that they would ignore Jewish law and skip the circumcision; and they called him Jesus.

We sometimes think of Christmas as a rather tame holiday. We think of sweet little baby Jesus asleep in the hay—tiny little hands that could do no harm, a bright halo above his head. Everyone loves that because it's so innocent and safe. But Christmas isn't safe! That baby is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He has come to usher in a Kingdom that rivals the kingdom of self. The manger is meaningless apart from the cross. He bids those who would follow him to take up their own cross and follow him. **Christmas is a time for obedience.**

3. Tell Others

It says that when Zechariah's friends heard him praise God, they began to talk all about it throughout the hill country of Judea.

It says when the shepherds arrived in Bethlehem and saw the child lying in the manger, "they made known the statement which had been told them about this child."

Notice the progression: they heard the angels; they went to Bethlehem; they saw the child; and then they told everybody. You cannot speak of what you have not seen and experienced in your own life.

If we neglect to proclaim the truth of Jesus, we've failed to do what should be the most important thing on our Christmas to do list.

The angel said that this is good news of great joy which shall be for all the people. Did you hear that? All the people. So don't let Christmas go by without telling someone about Jesus.

Simply Believe, Trust and Obey, Tell Others...and,

4. Engage in Holy Wonder.

When people heard what the shepherds were saying— **"all who heard it wondered"**. It's a good thing to wonder, but you don't want to stop there. Mary took it even a step further, when Luke 2:19 says, **"But Mary treasured all these things, and pondered them in her heart."**

Amidst all the Christmas activity, stop and engage in some holy wonder.

How do you do that? Maybe that means you stop in the middle of your shopping and sit down and pull out your Bible and just read the Christmas story. Maybe that means you gather your children around a nativity scene and talk about the role it plays in the Christmas story. Maybe that means you wake up early one morning this week and find a place you can watch the sun rise and meditate on Zechariah's words: ***"The Sunrise on high will visit us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace."***

Maybe that means you write the words of the angel on a 3x5 card and pull it out occasionally: ***"Behold I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all the people. ... "***

The work of holy wonder is the work of treasuring and pondering the fact that God invaded planet Earth on a perilous rescue mission.

When you do that, when you really let it sink in, you'll find yourself doing exactly what the shepherds did next. ***Verse 20 said they went back, glorifying, and praising God for all they had heard and seen.***

Good stuff right, but guess what, there is a Third birth in the Christmas story that I want to tell you about. IT will FILL YOU WITH MORE WONDER.

We find it talked about in the song: Hark the Herald Angels Sing, last verse

Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!

Hail the Son of Righteousness!

Light and life to all He brings

Ris'n with healing in His wings

Mild He lays His glory by

Born that man no more may die

Born to raise the sons of earth

Born to give them second birth

Hark! The herald angels sing

"Glory to the newborn King!"

2 Corinthians 9:15 says, ***"Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"***

What gift is he talking about. It's the gift of our Second Birth.

In "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas" by Dr. Seuss; The Grinch hated Christmas and went down to Whoville, to steal Christmas. He took every gift, every ornament, everything he could get his hands on, thinking that if the Who's lost all their stuff then they would cry instead of sing and Christmas wouldn't come. But high up on the mountain he heard all the Who's in Whoville singing on Christmas morning; they were just as joyful as ever.

And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice cold in the snow,
Stood puzzling and puzzling, how could it be so?
It came without ribbons. It came without tags.
It came without packages, boxes or bags.

And he puzzled and puzzled 'till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before.
What if Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store?

What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more? —

Illustration: In his book *Dare to Believe*, Dan Baumann illustrates what it is like to know that something is yours even though you must wait for it. You may even have it in hand but are not able to enjoy it “out of the box.” He says that when he was young, he always did a lot of snooping at Christmas time, trying to find his gift and figure out what was in the wrapped packages which his mom hid. One year he discovered a large package with his name on it that he knew was a set of golf clubs. One shake of that box revealed the unmistakable sound of clubs. He says, “When Mom wasn’t around, I would go and feel the package, shake it, and pretend that I was on the golf course. The point is, I was already enjoying the pleasures of a future event; namely, the unwrapped gift. It had my name on it. I knew what it was.”

It was his, but he would not enjoy it until he unwrapped it on Christmas day. Then he would see with his eyes what he had only seen with his heart.

Christmas means that God has given us the gift of Himself. For some people it is still wrapped. But the package has your name on it. You can look into His Word and know what awaits you. It is yours. We would never have received this indescribable gift if it were not for the Incarnation – God taking on flesh.

The same Holy Spirit who was present at creation and who came upon Mary, bringing to life the Son of God, is still present in the world. Because of that, we can know God ourselves. Jesus said that unless the same Holy Spirit who came upon Mary comes to live within a person, that person does not know God and does not have God's life within him.

Whereas our birth was physical, the birth that Jesus makes possible for us is spiritual. It's called being born again.

It's not that the person we are ceases to be. Instead, the presence of the Lord comes into our lives and helps us become the persons we should be.

When Christ is at the center of your life, there's a celebration in heaven that is even more wonderful than the celebration that took place when you were born on Earth. All of heaven rejoices when just one person comes to Christ.

This is exactly the point Paul makes in Galatians 4:4-5 when he says: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."

STORY: I heard the story of a Bible professor who had driven to Florida from Michigan and on his way, he stopped for breakfast in Georgia. He ordered the typical American breakfast – eggs, bacon, toast, and coffee. When the waitress set the plate down before him, he asked her “what is this glob of white stuff on my plate?” She said “grits”. He protested a bit and said, “I didn’t order grits.” And she said, ***“That’s correct, but down here, you don’t order them, and you don’t pay for them, but you get them anyway.”***

After arriving in Florida, and as he was teaching a class on God’s grace, he talked about this incident to his class. Then he made the application. He said, ***“That’s what grace is – we don’t order it, and we don’t pay for it, but we get it anyway; grace is grits and grits is grace.”***

Because of the wonder of the Christmas births, you don’t have to stay where you are. You can have a fresh start, and a new beginning life. God’s redemption comes through Jesus. You might be wondering; how do I get a new beginning? How do I receive the wonder of this second birth?

It’s not based on your goodness; it’s based on God’s goodness.
It’s not based on your work; it’s based on the work Jesus did on that cross.

There is no sin so terrible that God cannot forgive; there is no sin too deep that He cannot reach; there is no sin so hidden that He does not reveal; there is no sin so dirty and corrupt that He will not cleanse from our hearts; there is no sin so habitual that He cannot break; there is no sinner so alienated or so hostile that He cannot reconcile; there is no one that He cannot bring into the family of God; there is no guilt that He cannot pardon; there is no unfaithfulness that

He cannot show Himself faithful; there is no crooked way that He cannot make straight, no mountain He cannot make smooth, no valley He cannot fill.

In 2 Corinthians it says: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

Your Second Birth GIVES YOU A CELEBRATION

- GOD LOVES YOU!
- GOD IS WITH YOU!
- GOD IS FOR YOU!

YOUR SECOND BIRTH GIVES YOU SALVATION!

- SAVED FROM YOUR SIN
- SAVED FOR A PURPOSE
- SAVED BY GOD'S GRACE

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast."

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)

YOUR SECOND BIRTH GIVES YOU PEACE!

- PEACE WITH GOD (spiritual)
- PEACE OF GOD (emotional)
- PEACE WITH EACH OTHER (relational)

CONCLUSION: There was a sign offering a big cash reward for whoever found a lost dog. The description of the dog said, "He's only got three legs, he's blind in the left eye, he's missing a right ear, his tail has been broken off, he was neutered accidentally by a fence, he's almost deaf, and he answers by the name 'Lucky.'"

That dog has been through a lot, but he isn't just lucky to be alive! He's blessed because he's got an owner who loves him and wants him back. That's what redemption is all about! Do you know that you and I have a Heavenly Father who loves us, is seeking us out, and wants us back?

So next time you read the Christmas story, REMEMBER WONDER OF THE CHRISTMAS BIRTHS; all three of them, John's, Jesus', and YOURS.

**The wonder of Christmas is about a God who became us,
to redeem us, because He loves us.**