

AM Luke 1:26-38

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[0 : 00] I apologize to you all. When I sent the reading through for this morning's service, I was clearly on another planet because we're not going to hear from Luke chapter 1 this morning, rather from Luke chapter 2.

We're going to hear Luke chapter 2 verses 26 to 30. I'm getting a bit muddled now myself if I'm honest. But before we hear from the Lucan passage anyway, we're going to hear from Matthew's Gospel.

This is Matthew chapter 1 verse 18 through 25. And forgive me, you may have heard this already this year, I don't know.

But Matthew chapter 1 beginning at verse 18. Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

[1 : 29] She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, and he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. When Joseph woke from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

He took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son, and he called his name Jesus. And then we will also hear from Luke chapter 1, verses 26 to 38.

I was right the first time, forgive me. In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary.

And he came to her and said, Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you. But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

[2 : 47] And the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

And Mary said to the angel, How will this be, since I am a virgin? And the angel answered her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

Therefore the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son. And this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.

For nothing will be impossible with God. And Mary said, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her.

[4 : 03] Two readings there from God's holy word, for which we do give him all our thanks. Father, we do praise you for your word and trust that as we read and study it today, your Holy Spirit will be with us to lead and guide us.

For this we thank you in Jesus' name. Amen. Dear friends, I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew's Gospel, to the passage, the first of the two passages I just read you from Matthew chapter 1, beginning at verse 18.

Together with its counterpart in Luke, This is the sum total of the Gospel's narrative description of Christ's birth.

Now when we compare it to the nativity plays that you and I will have been subjected, I mean invited to in the past, it may be worth us just taking a moment to consider what we see here, and maybe crucially what we don't.

For example, were I a betting man, I would wager you that you could not find a donkey, or a grumpy innkeeper, nor indeed three wise men. And while it is clear from the Scriptures that Christ was laid in a manger, from Luke chapter 2 verse 7, there is no mention of a stable.

[5 : 25] Indeed, contrary to a way in a manger, there is no indication that the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes. Indeed, Hebrews 4 makes it clear that Jesus was an absolutely normal human child.

So to imagine a baby that doesn't cry is quite a stretch of the imagination. However, fear not, this morning I'm not planning to dismantle all of our favourite Christmas carols, because there are some good ones, but I'd like us to consider what actually is in Jesus' birth narrative, and what came before it, and see what this tells us about Christ's birth.

Now, our passage, the one from Matthew that I read, makes an immediate and blatant link between the birth of Jesus Christ, and a prophecy made some 735 years before his birth.

And we'll come to that in a minute, but before we turn to Isaiah, to the prophecy itself, let's consider what else the passage says. Firstly, it comes hot on the heels of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, his family tree, if you like, 17 verses of often unpronounceable names, which beneath their linguistic complexity, offer us a fascinating insight into a rather messy family tree of Jesus himself.

For while within the verses we see such wonderful people as Abraham, as David, and Solomon, we also find such names as Rahab, or Zerubbabel, or Tamar.

[7 : 04] The reading, on the one hand, clearly links Jesus Christ into this amalgam of names, showing his relationship to David, to Isaac, to Abraham, and to Jacob.

Yet, on the other hand, makes clear a number of times that Joseph was not the father of Jesus. We read in verse 18, before they came together, she, Mary, was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Verse 20, that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. And verse 25, he, Joseph, knew her not, until she had given birth to a son.

At a time when ink and parchment were jolly expensive, to have made this point at least three times indicates that it's something worth us sitting up and listening to. And indeed, without it, we would be forgiven for thinking that Jesus was just a normal boy born to normal parents.

But he was not. The reading also makes some claims about Jesus himself. Not only, as I've said, will be told that the child was from the Holy Spirit, but also, in verse 23, that Jesus is God with us.

[8 : 17] And that he will save his people. Not from the physical oppression of the Roman occupying forces, but, in verse 21, from their sins.

Let's take a moment just to pause and consider what was going on at the time of Christ's birth. And so, if you have one, I'd invite you to turn in your Bibles to page 972.

972 in your church Bibles. And if it's a church Bible like mine, you'll see that page 972 is in fact blank. Now, this blank page, page 972, represents a period of time called the Intertestamental Period.

A period of time lasting some 400 years between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New. Between God saying, in Malachi, behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes, and the opening verses of Matthew's Gospel.

Now, that period is also known as the 400 years of silence because of the length of time between these two books with no canonized or recorded prophecies or scriptures.

[9 : 44] The Old Testament ended with a great promise which is fulfilled 400 years later in the birth of Christ. But, for the intervening period, there was a spiritual silence, a spiritual darkness, a spiritual void, summed up in the words of John Morrison himself quoting from scripture, the race that long in darkness pined have seen a glorious light.

The people dwell in day who dwelt in nature's surrounding light. It was onto this scene, friends, that Jesus came. The darkness of the 400 years was banished by, to quote John's cross all the true light which enlightens everyone.

The silence of 400 years was shattered by the cry of a baby who was God with us, come to save his people from their sins.

God with us. As I mentioned earlier, the reading turns back some 730 odd years to the time of Isaiah, quoting from Isaiah chapter 7. And so, let us turn to that passage as indeed Matthew did. Isaiah chapter 7, beginning to read at verse 10, so this will be on page 690 in the church Bibles, where we can read as I say from verse 10.

[11:07] Again, the Lord spoke to Ahaz, Ask a sign of the Lord your God. Let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask and I will not put the Lord to the test.

And he said, Here then, O house of David, is it too little for you to weary men that you weary my God also? Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah, the king of Assyria.

We have to be careful as Christians not to disrespect the Old Testament. In fact, we have to treat it with the respect it deserves. All too often I have met Christians who see the only purpose of the Old Testament as backing up the New.

[12:31] And while the saying of St. Augustine is true, the New is in the Old concealed, the Old is in the New revealed, it would be a mistake. It would be leading to us missing an awful lot if we treated the Old Testament as some sort of fortune cookie which just predicted the New and nothing else.

So to understand that passage from Isaiah and indeed to understand Matthew's quotation of it, we need to look at that Isaiah passage in three distinct ways.

What the prophecy prophesied to Ahaz, what it prophesied to Matthew and his readers, and what it prophesied to us. In its original context, Isaiah chapter 7, we can see the Lord God speaking to King Ahaz, king of Judah.

Now Ahaz, we can read in 2 Kings, chapter 16, was 20 years old when he began to reign. He reigned in Judah for 16 years and he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord his God as his father David had done, but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel.

In the passage, we heard God speak to Ahaz through the words of the prophet Isaiah. We can read a few verses earlier that Rezin, the king of Syria, and Pekah, the son of Remaliah, the king of Israel, came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it.

[14:00] We read that Isaiah was sent to King Ahaz with words of comfort in verse 4. Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint.

And that the Lord challenged him to ask for a sign to confirm God's promise that he would destroy these two kings from the lands to the north that were currently threatening his kingdom.

Ahaz protested in verse 12 that he would not test the Lord, but Isaiah, speaking on behalf of God, berates him for trying his patience in his reply. Even though Ahaz refuses to ask a sign of the Lord, God gives him a sign anyway.

In those famous words, Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel. Now, the word virgin in the Isaiah passage is a Hebrew word, *almah*, and it will make things make a little more sense in a moment to know that at the time that it was written, the word that we now know as virgin could also have meant a young woman of marriageable age.

and so this is why when we get just a little bit further into Isaiah, things happen as they do. This does not discount that Mary was a virgin, quite the opposite.

[15:28] Mary was most certainly a virgin, but in the Isaiah passage that is relevant. the child himself will be God's sign that what he has said will come to pass.

He explains that before the child is old enough to know the difference between right and wrong, the lands of the dreaded kings will be laid waste. That's in chapter 7, verse 15. But before that can be interpreted as very good news, the prophet adds that they'll be replaced by an even worse invader, the land of Assyria.

The prophecy surrounding the sun comes to pass only one chapter later when Isaiah goes to his wife, this is in chapter 8, and bears him a son who he names to the great trembling of every

preacher everywhere, Mahershalal Hashbaz, which incidentally is the longest name in the Bible. The Lord tells him that before the boy knows how to cry my father or my mother, the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away before the king of Assyria.

This son, the son of Isaiah and his wife, is called Emmanuel, and this name is explained as God with us. The son is born to Isaiah and his wife to confirm the prophecy made one chapter earlier.

[16:51] Returning to two kings, we can read that Razin, the king of Syria, and Pekah, the son of Ramaliah, came up to wage war on Jerusalem and they besieged Ahaz but they could not conquer him, showing that the prophecy in chapter 7 came true, that they were not able to take the land.

Judah was not overtaken by the two kings. So that's the first way. That is what it meant to Isaiah and to Ahaz. Turning to the next distinct way, we can consider how the prophecy came true to Matthew.

Now the links between the Matthew passage we read earlier and the Isaiah passage are clear for all to see, but let's explore them just one time. The virgin shall conceive and bear a son.

In itself, this is an amazing declaration because as we know, that sort of thing just does not happen. It certainly doesn't just happen to us. However, for Jesus and his life and his ministry and indeed his genealogy to make any sense whatsoever, he had to be born of a virgin because otherwise he could not have been the son of God.

He would have been the son of Joseph. This is why Matthew makes the point three times in 1, verse 18, verse 20, and 25, that Joseph was not the father of Jesus but God was.

[18:15] However, Joseph also took Mary to be his wife, meaning that Jesus' family tree included, as I've said, the likes of Abraham and Isaac as was foretold in Genesis as well as Jacob foretold in Numbers.

Furthermore, Luke tells us in Luke chapter 2, verse 1, that in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered and all went to be registered each to his own town.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth to the city of David which is called Bethlehem because he was of the house and lineage of David.

This agrees with Matthew's genealogy, bringing into fulfillment the prophecy found in Micah chapter 5. But you, O Bethlehem, Ephrath, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

The next verse, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. But what did this birth mean? The ancient world was full of people who claimed to be the son of God or the son of the gods, Alexander the Great to the Egyptian pharaohs, to Julius Caesar himself.

[19:43] Indeed, even our friend Maher Shalal Hashbaz, Isaiah's son, was called Emmanuel, meaning God with us. But that God with us just meant that God was among them.

He was on their side, hence the armies not succeeding in their attack. But the birth of Christ gave new meaning to the phrase God with us. It was a literal meaning. It wasn't a promise that God was on their side, but a definition that Jesus was God and he was on earth.

It wasn't just that God was on their side, but, to quote C.S. Lewis, the stable had something in it that was bigger than our whole world. God was with them in the flesh, or to re-quote that Wesley hymn, our God contracted to a span incomprehensibly made man.

Now let us fast forward to the end of the New Testament, to the book of Revelation, because, as I've mentioned, this prophecy that we read in Matthew can be held up to the light and seen from three perspectives, from the time of Ahaz, the time of Matthew, and, for us today, the time, if you like, of the New Jerusalem.

Another way of saying this is to say that what the prophecy was promising to Ahaz was something different to what it was promising to Matthew and is something different to what it promises us.

[21:04] I have to be honest here. Friends, of all of my points this morning, this is the one I maybe have the least to say on, because it is slightly more tangential. But in Revelation, chapter 12, verse 1 to 2, we can read, And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.

She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. Biblical scholars believe that this vision of John was a vision of Christ's return.

Perhaps, thanks to verse 5, she gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was caught up to God and to his throne.

The dreadful imagery of the book of Revelation makes it clear that the time of this birth was pretty awful too, a little bit like the timing of the birth of Christ in Matthew, coming some 400 years after a period of silence and just before the murder of all the baby boys, and just like the timing of Mahershalal Hashbaz's birth when they were surrounded by the enemy.

The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah the king of Assyria, said Isaiah.

[22 : 35] Furthermore, we are promised as seen in Revelation that Christ will come again and will be with us when he returns in glory at the last day, that things will get immeasurably better, and that we will be with the Lord.

With this in mind, there are similarities across all three of the timescales for the Isaiah prophecies. They were true in the time of Ahaz, they were true in the time of Christ, and they will be true when we are in the time of the second coming.

I'm a terror for making notes in my Bible and in the little one I carry in my other jacket on page 805, that blank page of the intertestamental years, I've written the phrase things can only get better. Perhaps, for some of us of a certain age, it will turn our minds back to when that song was used at a certain general election. Perhaps, for others, it will cast minds back to 1952, to when, having emerged from the gloom of war and the misery of rationing and the like, we had a new bright-faced young queen, or maybe a decade earlier, when Winston Churchill declared, this is not the end, it is not the beginning of the end, but it is perhaps the end of the beginning.

That page, that single blank page between the Old and the New Testaments, is illustrative of the end of the beginning, and indeed, the beginning of the end. For the opening verses of the New Testament tell us that God has put his rescue plan into place, and has begun his redemption, which he had been making plans for from the beginning of time.

[24 : 23] We're caught up in this time now. Perhaps, we may even see it as another intertestamentary period. The time, if you like, between the end of Jude and the beginning of Revelation.

That's the period of time that we're living in now. We're living, knowing, all that Jesus and his followers did, but are waiting for Christ to come with shout of acclamation.

As Jeremiah wrote, Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord. This shows us a number of things, friends. We've considered that we must be careful with how we treat the Old Testament. It is not just a fortune quickly for the new. But I'd suggest that we must also be careful how we treat Christmas. Scotland has a very good and proud history of being sober-minded when it comes to Christmas.

I mean, for 250 years, the celebration of Christmas was banned outright, of course, because it was seen that only the Lord's Day is a holy day. It is only a Sunday that God instructs us to set aside as special, as sacred.

[25 : 36] And so, the thought of having another holy day on December 25th was anathema. Maybe we've passed that a little now, but even the other day I was listening to a radio programme where the presenter described Christmas as, quote, all about fun and family and happiness.

And while there is time for all of these things, doesn't that just illustrate what so many people think Christmas is and Christmas means? Well, if our scripture readings have shown us anything, if we've learned anything, we've learned just how long beforehand God was planning the birth of Christ and all that he would achieve.

We, as humans, also won't to overlook parts of the story as we add large chunks of it in from popular imagination, the grumpy innkeeper, the little donkey, the three kings.

If we do this, we risk allowing the beautiful, exciting message of the opening verses of the New Testament to be swamped by the Dickensian Christmas carol.

Even a few days ago, as I listened to the radio, I heard a Christopher song, A Spaceman Came Travelling, which is always played at Christmas. It imagines Christ Jesus himself as a spaceman travelling on his ship from afar.

[27 : 00] And those words, Do not fear. I come from a planet a long way from here and I bring a message for mankind to hear. I don't presume for one moment, friends, that you believe that Christ was a spaceman from afar, nor indeed that that's how you understand Christmas.

Indeed, the fact that you are part of a church who attends divine worship shows me that you don't. But how many people do we know where these cultural tropes, if you like, are the only exposure they get to the birth of Christ?

And isn't it tragic? Indeed, I once even met a person who went to a church who genuinely believed that because they celebrated Christ's birth every year on December 25th, that in some way Jesus was born again each year on December 25th, that he was made incarnate again somewhere in the world.

Maybe some of the phraseology of the carols that they used to sing have something to do with this. O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray, cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.

Or, yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning. But there's something else we can take away from these readings, friends. Something aside from wanting to remain close to scripture and not allow the ways of the world to interfere, we can remember how the words of those prophecies I quoted came true every single one, every single time.

[28 : 36] A number of years ago now I sat down and set myself a challenge to find as many Old Testament prophecies as I could that find themselves foretelling the life of Christ and then find their New Testament fulfillment.

And I ended up with some 47 of these, 47 promises that God spoke hundreds if not thousands of years before the birth of Christ that were fulfilled in his life.

They all came to pass. And what does this tell us? It tells us that we are justified in having great faith in the promises of scripture. God's promises foretelling the birth of Christ came true.

God's promises foretelling the birth of Maha Shalal Hashbaz came true. And there is every reason to believe that his other promises will come true as well.

The promises from Matthew's account of Christ's birth that he will save his people from their sins apply as much to you and to me as they did to Matthew's original readers.

[29 : 38] The promise of God with us is as much the case now as it was back then. This is, if you like, the message of Christmas. So, this morning, as the weeks and months of Christmas planning are long behind us, as the Christmas turkey is all but finished, as the tinsel and presents are taken down, let us remember the 22nd and 23rd answers from the Catechism.

that Christ, the Son of God, became man by assuming a real body and a reasoning soul. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary who gave birth to him and yet he was sinless.

As our Redeemer, Christ is prophet, priest and king in both his humiliation and his exaltation. And let us sing in the words of the carol, we hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell.

O come to us and abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel. Let us pray. Most gracious God, we thank you that Christmas is about so much more than what the world makes it out to be.

That in Christmas you began your great plan of redemption which was in place before the world began. We thank you that in Christmas the world received Christ.

[31 : 06] That he came to save his people from their sins. And we thank you that we are counted among that number. So we pray as we prepare to leave worship this morning that you may fill us with the hope, the joy, the peace and the light that came from Christ's entry into the world.

And that we may be strengthened to live out our Christian callings in the days, weeks and months ahead. And this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.