

Announcing the Baptist's Birth

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, brothers and sisters. My name's Josh, and I'm also a part of the RMIT team that's been here this week. And I just want to say how grateful we are to the church for hosting us. We've had a wonderful time. We've spent some time with the kids.

We've spent some time with the youth. And we've been involved in a whole lot of activities in the church, and it's been a great blessing to us. We've also had people cooking dumplings for us and all kinds of wonderful food. And we feel very welcomed, so thank you.

Also, we're going to be hanging around after the service, so please take some time to meet us. We'd love to get to know you a bit more and to share a bit about what God has been doing in our lives and also what God has been doing at RMIT University.

I'm going to speak today from Luke chapter 1. Now, when I was 15 years old, I was on holiday with some friends down at the beach. And on this particular trip, my friends and I built a raft. We collected a whole lot of bits of driftwood that we found on the beach, and we lashed them together with rope, kind of Tom Hanks castaway style. And we launched our raft out into the water, and we had a great time paddling it up and down the beach. Now, at this beach, there was a shipwreck, a big, rusty ship that had been lost at sea years before.

It was a few kilometres offshore. And someone had the bright idea that we should paddle our little raft out to this shipwreck. So we all jumped on, about 10 of us, onto this little raft, and we started paddling out into the ocean. We paddled for one hour, then we paddled for two hours. And we kept paddling until our tents that were pitched on the beach were just these tiny little specks in the distance. And the shipwreck didn't seem any closer. And that was when the weather changed. It had been a really still, glassy sea in the morning, but all of a sudden it started to rain a little bit, and then the rain got a bit heavier.

[2 : 1 4] And then this heavy fog drifted in from sea. And within a few minutes, we were completely surrounded. At first, we lost sight of the shipwreck, but then we lost sight of the shore.

All we could see was mist all around us. It was quite a scary situation to be in. Luckily, someone had brought a Tupperware container with some brownies in it. So that made us feel a little bit better. But we didn't have a mobile phone or a flare. So we're in a pretty sticky situation. We're in a helpless situation out there on the open sea. Now today in Luke chapter one, we're going to be looking at how God intervenes in a helpless situation. And I think there's times when all of us feel helpless. When we look at our lives, when we look at the world around us, and it's just such a mess, and we feel helpless. But the good news is that God has a plan. God actually does have a plan, and God intervenes in the world. And I hope that today we'll see God's amazing plan begin to unfold. So not long into chapter one of Luke, we meet these two people, Zechariah the priest and Elizabeth, his wife. And in verse six, we read that both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless, because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. So despite their faithfulness, Zechariah and Elizabeth hadn't been able to have children.

And because of their age, it looked like they'd missed out. Now, if you know anyone who has struggled with infertility, you'll know just how difficult it is, how painful it can be. Year after year of trying for children, and one by one seeing those around you with their growing families while you're left childless. It's a really, really tough thing to go through. It's hard in our time, and I'd suggest that it would have been even harder for Zechariah and Elizabeth, because in the ancient world, the whole of life revolved around family. You look forward to having children, not just for your own sake, but for the sake of carrying on your family name, having descendants into the future. And without children, people often felt alone and felt disgraced. And not only that, but children were actually a source of a couple's financial security as well. So back then, there was no Centrelink, there was no pension, there was no super, there were no nursing homes. People needed children to look after them in their old age. So Zechariah and

Elizabeth are in a helpless situation. But at the same time, there's actually a bigger picture going on in Luke's gospel in the background. And that is that the nation of Israel is also in a helpless situation. Now, if you know anything about Israel's history, if you've read the Old Testament, you'll know that Israel had been through many tough times, usually as a result of their own sin. They'd been in conflict with one another, the kingdom had split into two, the people had been in and out of exile, and foreign armies were always coming and invading Israel. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, and now the Romans.

And if that wasn't bad enough, at this point, God hadn't spoken to Israel for 400 years. 400 years. Have you ever had a fight with a friend or perhaps an argument with your spouse? If you have a fight with someone and you stop talking to each other for a week or perhaps for a few days, it's really hard, isn't it? It's quite a terrible feeling, silence from the one that you love. But just think about this.

[6 : 31] The last prophet before the time of Zechariah was Malachi. And after Malachi, there were no prophets. No prophets, no visions, no word from the Lord. 400 years of silence from God.

And the nation of Israel hadn't turned out the way that it was meant to be. It had become a desolate place, a helpless place. Instead of being the great nation that God had envisaged for them, they'd become an insignificant place, a kind of a backwater where nothing important was going on.

Maybe a little bit like Geelong is today. Now, just imagine how people like Zechariah would have felt. They were the faithful ones of Israel, those who'd persevered. When they looked around at their nation, they would have wondered, where is God in all this? Where are all the great promises that God had for us?

You know, God, didn't you say that you would make Abraham's descendants into a great nation? Didn't you say you'd bless us and give us a land of our own? But here we are being occupied by the Roman army.

So, Israel was in a helpless situation, and Zechariah and Elizabeth were in a helpless situation. But the good news is that no matter how helpless the situation is, no matter how bleak it looks, God always has a plan. Things might not go to our plan, but they always go to God's plan.

[8 : 03] And God intervenes. God has a plan, and God intervenes. And that's what God does here. So, have a look at verse 8. It starts in verse 8. Zechariah is chosen to go into the temple of the Lord to burn incense in his presence.

And while Zechariah is in the temple, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and gripped with fear.

And the priests were chosen to go into the center of the temple once in their lifetime. So, this is already a pretty special day for Zechariah.

And just imagine how much more extraordinary it would have been for him to look up and see the angel standing there in front of him. And the angel says to him, Don't be afraid, Zechariah.

Your prayer has been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He'll be a joy and a delight to you.

[9 : 09] So, after years of infertility, when all hope of having children was gone, God intervened miraculously in Zechariah and Elizabeth's life. And just imagine how joyful they would have felt.

But that's actually just the start of what God is doing. God's not just helping this one couple here. He's actually intervening powerfully in the lives of the whole of the people of Israel and beyond as well, in the whole world.

And the way he does that is through this child, through this little baby, John. And it turns out from the passage that he's not really a normal boy, is he? He's not a normal child.

The angel says there in verses 14 to 17, that many will rejoice because of John's birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.

He's never to take wine or other fermented drink. And he'll be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he's born. He'll bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

[10 : 13] 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.

Imagine if somebody said that about your unborn baby. It would be a little bit of a surprise. This child, this kid, is destined for greatness before he's even born.

And you might actually remember, Jesus himself says later on in Luke's Gospel that among those born of women, there is none greater than John. And as far as I know, everyone in the world in history has been born of a woman.

So Jesus is saying that up until this point, John is actually the greatest person to walk the earth other than the Lord himself. So John's going to be a special man.

He's going to be greater than Elijah. He'll be filled with the spirit from birth. And remember, this is the time before Pentecost, in a time when only a select few people received God's spirit, and often only for a short time as well.

[11 : 24] This is a man who will be filled with the spirit for his whole life. And God has a very special purpose for John. In fact, he's got two purposes. His purpose is to use John to turn people back to himself and to prepare the way for the Lord.

We did a nativity play with our RMIT team at a primary school on Friday. And one of the props that we had was a stuffed donkey.

I think it was the donkey from Shrek, the movie. The kids loved it. I can't actually remember what the purpose of having the donkey in the play was. But it got me thinking about what are donkeys like.

So I was just pondering donkeys. And the only thing I could think of is that donkeys are stubborn. Actually, when I was younger, my friend brought a donkey on a camping trip, and it was the worst.

We couldn't get it to do anything that we wanted. Stubborn donkey. And throughout the Bible, God's people, Israel, are like donkeys. They're stubborn. Stubborn, stiff-necked, hard-headed people, always turning away from God, always following their own ways.

[12 : 37] But that's about to come to an end because God is going to use John to reconcile his people. It says there he'll turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and he'll reconcile the people to himself.

Like the children's talk said, John didn't win MasterChef, but he turned people back to God. And I actually think this is what the angel means when he says that God has answered your prayer to Zechariah, because it's most likely that when Zechariah was in the temple, he was praying, probably praying for a child, but more than that, he was praying for the redemption of his nation, for the consolation of Israel.

You'll probably find out in the next couple of weeks about Simeon and Anna, the other two great heroes at the start of Luke's Gospel who had spent their whole lives waiting and praying for God to redeem Israel.

And John is the start of that great plan. So John is great, but the amazing thing is that God actually has an even bigger plan than John.

So God sending John the Baptist is not really the climax of the plan. In fact, John is just there to make people ready for the Lord.

[13 : 58] And this is straight from the prophet Malachi that I mentioned before. Malachi 3, in Malachi 3, God says, I'll send my messenger who will prepare the way before me.

So by sending John, God is actually fulfilling the promise that he made hundreds of years beforehand. As Christians, we often encourage each other by saying God has a plan.

You know, when life is difficult, don't worry, brother, God has a plan for your life. And we can use that language quite flippantly and easily. But the truth is that God actually does have a plan.

And in fact, God's plan is so detailed and specific that he actually has a plan for the plan. God has a plan for the plan. His small plan is to bring in the big plan.

So the big plan is that God himself is going to come to earth. This is a bit of a spoiler alert. I hope I'm not giving away the ending.

[14 : 58] But in Luke 2, Jesus is actually coming onto the scene. That's God's big plan. God is going to come himself to earth. And the smaller plan is that God is using John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus.

He's getting people ready to meet God, to meet the Lord himself. So can you see what's going on here? God is having compassion on this couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, intervening in their lives.

But by doing that, he's actually intervening more powerfully by preparing the way for Jesus. He's intervening in the nation of Israel and in the whole world.

So my friends and I were out there on the raft, out on the open ocean. We were drifting around. We'd finished eating our brownies. We were starting to get a bit cold, shivering a bit, and getting a bit worried.

And then we heard this sound in the distance, this kind of buzzing, whining sound. And after a while, it sounded like it was getting a bit closer. And eventually we saw that it was a boat.

[16 : 02] There was a boat out there on the sea with us. It turns out that our friends back at camp had got concerned about us. So they'd found a fisherman with his boat and they'd asked him to come out and rescue us.

And I can still remember putting my arm over the side of the boat from the raft, all wet and miserable, and somebody grabbing me and hauling me into the boat. And it was just the best feeling.

The feeling of not being alone, not being abandoned, but somebody intervening in our situation. And just think, what a wonderful day it would have been for the people of Israel to see that God was intervening in their nation.

There was finally hope. After 400 years of silence, God has broken his silence and he's intervening. Now, working at RMIT, I come into contact with a lot of very highly educated people, people with degrees in science and arts and civil engineering, or civil engineering, as we call it.

I meet people with masters and PhDs and certificate twos and all kinds of wonderful qualifications. And one of the common questions that I get asked as a Christian at uni is, how can we know that the Bible is reliable?

[17 : 26] You know, it's full of great stories. That's a great story about Zechariah and Elizabeth. But, you know, isn't it just kind of mythology and nice stories that somebody has made up?

Or even worse, isn't the Bible just a book that the church uses to control people's behaviour? So I'll just briefly address that issue. I think it's similar to the way that a uni student at RMIT today would go about writing a historical essay.

They'd do their research, they'd read books, they'd conduct interviews with people, they'd investigate and find out as much material as they could to make sure that what they were writing was accurate.

And that's exactly what Luke did, the writer of Luke's Gospel. If you look back at the first four verses of the chapter, Luke actually tells us that this book is a careful account of the things that had recently occurred, specifically about Jesus' life and ministry.

So Luke says there that he's writing so that Theophilus and others in the future will know the certainty of what had happened. And to make sure that his account was accurate, Luke has actually investigated the story, he's worked carefully through the eyewitness accounts, and he's studied everything before writing this Gospel.

[18 : 51] And so I think as Christians today, we really can have confidence that what is recorded in the Gospel is accurate, it's reliable and accurate. So the big question is, how does this story affect us today?

What can we learn from Luke chapter 1? I've got three Ps, three Ps. Prepare, promises, and perseverance.

Prepare, promises, and perseverance. So firstly, we need to prepare. The whole reason that God sent John, the reason that God intervened, was so that John could prepare the way for Jesus, to get people ready to meet Jesus.

And I think John is kind of like one of those roadwork signs that you see on the freeway at night, you know those big flashing arrows that tell you to go off the side, you know, go this way. If you go this way, you'll end up in a hole.

Go off to the side. John is like one of those signs. He's pointing people towards Jesus. And we need to ask the question, are we ready for the Lord's coming?

[20 : 08] Now Jesus has already come, but he promises that he will return again. He will come back. So whether you're a Christian or not a Christian, are you prepared for the Lord's return?

Do you look forward to meeting Jesus? Are you looking forward to that day? Is your heart ready? Have you turned? Have you repented and turned back to God? Are you ready for the Lord to come?

So we need to prepare. Secondly, these two go together, promises and perseverance. Promises and perseverance. We need to trust in God's promises and we need to persevere in our faith.

Now the great thing about being a Christian is that we know that when God makes a promise, he always keeps it. And we live in a world of broken promises, don't we?

Friends break promises. Husbands and wives sometimes break the promises that they made to one another in marriage. Politicians, mobile phone companies, everyone, they promise so much, but so often they let us down, don't they?

[21 : 14] But God is always faithful to his promise. I'll give you a few examples. God promised Abraham and Sarah a son and he gave them Isaac.

He fulfilled his promise. He promised that when he sent the people into exile, the Israelites into exile, that he would preserve a remnant and bring them back to the land. And he did. He promised that he would send John the Baptist and he did.

He promised that he would redeem Israel and he did. So God always keeps his promises. And I think that, brothers and sisters, that should be a great comfort to us as believers and it should enable us to persevere because we know that God is faithful to his promises.

I've got a friend who stopped being a Christian last year. And the reason was because she was single. She found it really hard being single.

She felt quite lonely. She was growing a bit older and unmarried and she was actually angry at God. She was angry at God for not providing her with a husband and so she didn't persevere in her faith.

[22 : 26] But the thing is that God doesn't actually promise to give us everything that we want. He doesn't promise to give us a spouse.

He doesn't promise that all of us will be able to have children. He's infinitely powerful enough, as we've seen from today's story. He could. He could intervene in all our lives and provide us with every good thing that we desire.

But he doesn't promise to. But the thing is God actually has bigger promises and better promises.

And so in order to persevere, we need to know those promises. We need to know what are the promises of God. As Christians, we live on this side of the cross and the great thing is that we can actually see God's big picture.

It's kind of already unfolded. It's unfolding before our eyes. God has sent John the Baptist. God has sent Jesus. And in Jesus, we have all of God's promises fulfilled.

[23 : 33] We've got forgiveness. We have forgiveness at the cross. We have a new family. We have brothers and sisters in Christ. We have the Holy Spirit. And we have a secure relationship with our Father.

And many other promises. I could go on and on. But the thing is that these are promises that we can actually hold on to regardless of our circumstances. Whatever our situation is like, these promises don't change.

And we know that we can trust God, that He always fulfills His promises. So I want to encourage you to hold on to the promises of God. If you're feeling hopeless, if life feels helpless, let's hold on to those promises.

I think Zechariah and Elizabeth are a good example to follow. When they didn't have a child for all those years, their response wasn't to get bitter with God or to throw in the towel with their faith.

No, verse 6 says that they were upright and godly and they continued to trust and obey God. And we should do the same through the difficulties of life because we know the bigger promises of God.

[24 : 44] For some of us, the challenge could be infertility like Zechariah and Elizabeth. For others, it could be illness, having those long-term health problems that just don't go away.

Or it could be being unemployed or feeling lonely and being single when others around us are getting married. These are painful experiences.

They're difficult experiences. And the Christian life can be really hard, can't it? It can be really hard. But when we feel helpless, when we feel hopeless, let's not abandon the one who gives us eternal hope.

Let's persevere in our faith because we know that God is faithful. So finally, I want to remind you, brothers and sisters, that God has a plan.

God has a plan and God intervenes. No matter how helpless the situation is, God has a plan. And He's intervened powerfully by sending John and even more powerfully by sending Jesus.

[25 : 49] So let me encourage you to respond to God's intervention. Respond to God's intervention by doing those three things, by persevering in our faith, by holding on to God's promises, and by being prepared for Jesus' coming.

Thank you.