

Sunday 7th December 2025 - Advent: Inconceivable?

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] We are halfway through Advent this season anticipating the arrival of Jesus! And indeed the birth of Jesus not only gives us the reason for this whole season of Christmas, but Jesus' birth, as you'll know, is also the event from which our calendar originates.

Yes, there's some debate as to whether Jesus' birth actually took place exactly 2,025 years ago in the year zero, or if those sums are a bit out and he was actually born a few years before that. If so, I guess that makes me a child of the 60s rather than the 70s, and I'll take that maybe. But either way, from Christmas and the whole shebang that's coming up over the next few weeks, to our calendars, to really the whole shape of our faith and understanding of who God is, Jesus' arrival is obviously of monumental significance.

And yet what's interesting, and what I'd like us maybe to explore today, are the circumstances surrounding his arrival, and more specifically, the moment of conception, when Jesus' mother, Mary, became pregnant with him.

And so here's how that event is described in the Bible. Here's our reading for this morning. From Luke's Gospel, chapter 1, starting at verse 26.

[1 : 32] In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.

The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, Greetings, you who are highly favored.

The Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary.

You have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He 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, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end.

[2 : 58] How will this be? Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin. The 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. 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. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered.

May your word to me be fulfilled. Then the angel left her. Now, although it's maybe a familiar story for many of us, I'm sure, there's a lot in there.

And it'd be good just to pick out some key bits to see what we might learn, perhaps afresh, this morning. So if you recall just from then, the passage begins in this way.

[4 : 13] We're told, In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin, pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.

The virgin's name was Mary. Now, if you were here last week, or you've caught up online, Laura took us through the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah, involving a visit by the same angel mentioned here, Gabriel.

And whether he earned frequent flyer miles or not, I don't know. But if you recall, Gabriel, he appeared to Zechariah while he was in a temple in Jerusalem to tell him that he, and let's say his equally vintage wife, Elizabeth, would have a son called John.

And then six months later, Gabriel appears again, only this time to a relative of Elizabeth's, Mary. So we discover from this passage here that Mary lives in Nazareth, which was a pretty small town of maybe three, four hundred people in their day.

And it was a poor town since archaeology reveals that most people in Nazareth at the time of Mary were living in caves hollowed out into limestone below ground.

[5 : 39] And if you go to Nazareth today, you can see remains of some of these caves. That's a view from the top down. That's kind of what they look like inside as well, below ground.

And what's more, one such cave in Nazareth has for a long time now been traditionally identified as the cave where Mary lived and therefore where Gabriel visited her.

Yes, it's been modified and made safe perhaps over the years. And it's now essentially really part of a crypt in a more modern church in Nazareth.

But it's usually good reason why for many hundreds and hundreds of years these sites were first identified. So it stands to reason it may well be the cave where all this happened.

If so, here it is again, just this little setting here. It's an incredibly humble setting for such an important event. But I guess knowing what we do about Jesus, perhaps such a humble beginning was wholly in keeping with what he would grow up to champion.

[6 : 55] Things like simplicity and humility and integrity rather than perhaps symbols of status or success or wealth. I know for me, when I think about Mary living in a cave below ground, that's a constant challenge for me and maybe for us to keep in mind and to live by.

But one which seems to be from the word go to be at the heart of Jesus' way of life. What else? Well, we're told that Mary was a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph who was a descendant of David.

And that's a small sentence, but there's a huge amount of significance in there. So, with the Gospel of Luke being originally written in Greek, the English word that we translate as virgin here is a translation of the Greek word parthenos.

Parthenos. More specific, though, than just describing someone who hadn't had sex, though, it's a word usually used in ancient times to describe a young girl of marriageable age who by virtue of not yet being married was a virgin.

That was a usual expectation, at least, that being unmarried automatically meant that you were a virgin. Now, we know from historical records from the time of Mary that the minimum age for girls to be married was just 12 years old.

[8 : 36] And therefore, most Jewish girls, like Mary, would be married off in arranged marriage by the age of maybe 12 and a half or 13. This is partly because Mary and Early gave girls the maximum time to hopefully have children, you know, pretty important in a time when child mortality was tragically high.

but it was also because getting married off at the start of puberty could guarantee a girl's virginity. And being a virgin at marriage was seen to be of crucial importance at the time under religious and cultural expectations, you know, female virginity in particular being particularly prized in, let's remember, what was a male-dominated patriarchal world.

Now, what's interesting though is that we read here that Mary is not yet married but is instead pledged to be married.

So, firstly, that means that Mary is likely to have been as young as 12 years old. Shockingly young age to bear in mind with all that she is about to be asked to do.

And yet, being 12, I think is also an indication of just how strong and courageous and mature Mary must have been.

[10 : 07] Which itself underlines the way in which God seems to choose and champion people based on their character and not on their age or their social status. And again, I know for me, maybe for you, that's a lesson that we do well to keep keeping on board.

But secondly, this pledged to be married detail, some translations say betrothed to be married. Well, we might think in our day that that's similar to being engaged perhaps for us.

Being betrothed at the time was much more binding than that. In some ways, on a par almost with being married. betrothal involved, for example, the drawing up of a legal deed, kind of like a prenup, I guess, these days, involved the exchange of money between the future bride and groom.

And then once betrothed to each other, the couple could only be separated by death or by seeking legal divorce. In fact, the main difference between betrothal and marriage was that there was to be

no sex.

And if the betrothed couple did have sex either with each other or with someone else, that was considered to be adultery and it could be punished by death.

[11 : 35] Now, there was normally a 12-month gap between betrothal and marriage during which time the young girl would stay in her family home until she was old enough for marriage.

During this time, though, her fiancé would live with his family so they'd each stay with their parents. But in particular, the bloke's job during that year or so was to spend that year building a room, an extension on the side of his family home that the couple could both move into once married.

I don't know what you feel about that, marrying and going and living with your parents-in-law or whatever, but that was the custom in those days. You'd go and live with the husband's family.

And the moment the room was finished and built by the husband-to-be, whether it was day or night, the groom-to-be would send a message to his bride-to-be.

They'd call friends and family together and they'd hold a marriage ceremony and a reception party as soon as possible, often perhaps the day or the day after, as soon as they could get everything organised.

[12 : 51] In some ways, I guess the prospect of getting married and having sex was a decent motivation to ensure the groom worked every hour available to get his room finished as soon as possible.

I'll leave you to work out that one. But I think it also, this whole practice, it gives us an insight into something that Jesus says in John's Gospel.

When at one point he says this to his disciples, he says, my father's house has many rooms and I'm going there to prepare a place for you and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

Basically, a picture of marriage in which Jesus is like a bridegroom who lovingly builds a place in his father's house for us, his bride.

Now this picture Jesus paints is really quite an intimate, personal, might say sort of beautiful kind of picture, but it's all rooted in this idea of betrothal.

[14 : 04] in St. Mary and Joseph's case, as a betrothed couple, Joseph would no doubt have been busily building a home for him and Mary, anticipating the day when they would get married and start a family.

However, at some stage in that year, these plans were upended by Gabriel visiting Mary in which she's told this.

he tells her, do not be afraid Mary, you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son and you are to call him Jesus.

He will be great and will be called the son of the most high. Now, knowing Mary's likely age, knowing the fact that she's already betrothed to Joseph and knowing the scandal and the risk to her life that being pregnant during betrothal could be for her, we can imagine this news must have come as a complete bombshell to her.

You can imagine all sorts of thoughts whizzing through Mary's head. If I'm going to conceive, does this mean I'm meant to have sex with Joseph? But that can't be what God is asking of me.

[15 : 28] But if I get pregnant, what will people say? What will Joseph say? And as we know from Matthew's gospel, when Joseph found out about her pregnancy, he was initially minded to quietly divorce her in order to save her from public disgrace, in order, it seems, to perhaps save her life.

You know, that, I suspect, was what Mary, deep down, feared, too. But then perhaps most of all, Mary will be wondering how and why will this son of mine be called the son of the most high, the son of God, in other words.

So it's no wonder that she replies to Gabriel, how will this be since I'm a virgin? And it's an obvious kind of revealing question.

But Mary doesn't respond with skepticism, like Zachariah did last week, by saying, you know, how can I be sure of this? You know, prove it to me. Now, instead, she takes Gabriel's words at face value, but understandably wants to know more details.

Thankfully, Gabriel answers her. He 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.

[16 : 55] Not only, therefore, is Joseph not involved, but neither will sex be involved in this conception at all. Rather, this baby will somehow be conceived through the power and the presence

of God's Holy Spirit working a miracle in Mary's life.

life. And we talked about Mary being mature, perhaps, earlier. Her response to this is remarkably reassured, shows such faith and such courage, such strength, because she says, I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled.

God. And that little statement, that's hugely important, because it shows that Mary trusts in God and chooses to become an active participant in the story of Jesus.

She wasn't coerced, God didn't control her, she could have said no, and of course a loving God wouldn't have violated her body by forcing her to carry a child against her will, but by freely consenting to be the body through which Jesus would be born.

She's also committing to life ahead, she's also committing to being the one who would have the biggest role in raising and nurturing Jesus into his adult years.

[18 : 31] That is some privilege, that is some responsibility, but as Mary's words reveal in the song she sings later, that we know as the Magnificat, she proves herself to be a truly remarkable, clued up woman, the kind of woman in fact that you'd imagine God would choose to be the mother of his son.

Now, as you might expect, the literal truth or otherwise of this moment of conception in Mary's life has been hotly debated for centuries, and I imagine if we did a straw poll in this room, there'd probably be a whole range of views about how these things actually happened.

So for many folks, perhaps understandably, this whole story of Mary conceiving as a virgin is simply unbelievable. We might say it's inconceivable.

how on earth is Mary meant to conceive outside of having sex? Or if there's conception outside of sex, to be biological, where does the sperm come from to fertilize her egg?

Does God kind of artificially inseminate Mary? If so, how, and with what? And if Jesus is meant to be fully human, how are we to understand him having chromosomes and DNA and genes and so on, if not through having a biological father and a biological mother?

[20 : 10] But more than that, if this story of Jesus' conception is true and therefore of crucial importance, why is it only found in two out of four Gospels?

Only Matthew and Luke mention it. It doesn't appear at all in Mark and John. Why isn't more of this miraculous beginning to Jesus' life, this conception made more of a thing in Jesus' adult life as evidence that he's special, that he's divine?

And why are the circumstances of Jesus' birth hardly mentioned, hardly referenced in the rest of the New Testament? These are all good questions, perhaps.

And so belief in this virginal conception, it wavers over the years. And the assumption becomes that Mary must have had sex, either with Joseph or with someone else, and conceived the baby in the normal way.

Yes, we can still believe that the baby grew up to be Jesus, but if he wasn't conceived as the son of God in Mary, then either Jesus is simply, solely, a human being, or be an amazing one at that, or we need to find some other way in which Jesus can become fully God as well as fully human.

[21 : 40] And so the most popular theory that's put forward to account for his humanity and his divinity, if not through this conception in Mary, is that it was at Jesus' baptism, that the human Jesus also became the divine Jesus, adopted, if you like, by his heavenly father, who, if we recall, said these words, this is my son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased.

And you can perhaps see the attraction of this line of thinking, because in some ways it's more believable. And maybe that's where you're at this morning.

And yet, and yet, as unlikely as the whole idea of Mary's conception of Jesus in such a miraculous fashion is, I think if we dismiss these events as mere fable or fabrication, then I'd suggest we diminish both ourselves and the God in whom we're called to place our faith and put our lives in his hands.

You see, despite many rational, sensible reasons not to, I do believe in the story of Mary's miraculous conception of Jesus through God's Holy Spirit.

And why is that? Well, numerous reasons, but for a start, I believe Mary's account of what happened to her.

[23 : 25] You see, we know from elsewhere in the Gospels and from other traditions that Mary was alive and around for the whole of Jesus' time on earth, you know, from his birth to his death, his resurrection and beyond.

And it's therefore almost guaranteed that the story of Jesus' conception and birth, a story about which, let's remember, only Mary would know some of the details.

You can imagine that that was told by her to others, we know, to Elizabeth. It would be told to her and Joseph's other sons and daughters who came about naturally after Jesus.

Now, presumably, she also shared the story with Jesus' disciples and maybe even directly to Gospel writers like Luke. and so to doubt the validity of this account is to assert that Mary constructed and maintained what must arguably be the most conflict and the most influential of lies in the history of the world, something which I just can't imagine being the case, given what we see of her character.

Mary's not a liar. her faith, her response to the angel Gabriel, and the length of time she spent in the company of Jesus and others, they all give validity to this account.

[24 : 52] Equally, it's not just Mary. In Matthew's Gospel, where we read Joseph's version of events, they not only dovetail with Mary's, but they reveal Joseph to be someone of equal integrity and faith.

Again, although Joseph is reckoned to have died at some stage in Jesus' teenage years or his twenties, Joseph was around long enough for his account of Jesus' conception and birth to have been tried and tested, and still the story remained the same.

But even more importantly than the human parental element to all this, we come to the person, we might say the incarnation of Jesus himself.

You see, the whole wonder of the Christian faith is the belief in a God who is intrinsically, intimately involved in our lives.

A God in whose image each of us are somehow made, a God with whom we can be in relationship, and a God who most importantly, who is love.

[26 : 05] the God who so loved the world that he sent his one and only son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

The whole gospel, the whole good news of this love is built around this same God coming to do life with us in every way.

As John says, the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. That means from conception to the cross, from the womb to the tomb, from his resurrection to the coming of his Holy Spirit, the Spirit who remains with us and in us now.

And all of that is brilliant, it's life changing. But what I especially love about the way God came to do life with us through Jesus is that he starts from the very beginning, from conception itself.

I don't know how God did it, the DNA, the chromosomes, the genetic code and so on, but I believe he did because that is precisely what a God of love would do.

[27 : 22] I don't think God would turn up fully formed as an adult halfway through life. or even somehow inhabit a human at some point making them divine.

But a God of love would come to be God with us as a baby, with all of the risks and the reflux, all of the tears and the temperatures, all of the helplessness and the holding that comes with being born into the world.

wiser people than me. People like a biblical scholar, Paula Gooda. She puts it like this. She says the birth narratives are about the mind blowing, brain boggling truth that the God who shaped the universe into existence was prepared to be born as a tiny vulnerable baby.

This God trusted his whole well-being to a young girl who had never had a baby before and wasn't even married. This God chose a ludicrously risky means of redeeming the world he loved so much. And yet isn't that the kind of God we would want? You know, a God who loves us so radically so irresistibly that he risks everything simply to be with us so that he can show us that love in person.

[28 : 54] A God who becomes life only in later years to lose his life before regaining life so that we can know that same life now in all its fullness.

You know, that for me is why Jesus is coming to be God with us conceived in Mary by the power of the Spirit is such good news because in Jesus, with Jesus, through Jesus, we encounter the one who is the way, the truth, and the life.

The one who gives us hope and peace and joy and love. Not just at Advent, not just at Christmas, and not just all year round, but for all eternity.

Amen.