

# His coming announced

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[ 0 : 00 ] Emily, thank you. Don't you think that's such a humble response right at the end there?! Out of nowhere, I mean it is out of nowhere for her, the Lord God has broken into a young woman's life, spoken to her, troubled her, urged her to not be afraid as he takes over her life for his purposes.

He breaks into her life and Mary answers, well I think so straightforwardly and beautifully, don't you think? I am the Lord's servant, what you want for me I will do, she says.

And what we've done, we've just read from or had read to us Luke 1 and Luke 1 is the start of the old, old story of the lead-up to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. We're going to follow through Luke 1 and 2 over this next few weeks and there'll be angels and Mary and Joseph and a manger and shepherds and with this backdrop behind me, in part be forgiven as we read these old words for straying in your mind to a nativity play.

Children in badly fitting angel costumes with tinsel halos and wonky donkeys on the side and grinning wise men and cooing parents and twinkly lights. The nativity play, the nativity story. Which can be a bit dangerous. Because along with that acted out Christmas story that the kids do, which you can't help but think about as Christmas comes around, does come a sense, does it not, in our culture that the narrative of Jesus' birth is, well it's kind of a sweet, made-up fairy story really, for the kids.

[ 1 : 48 ] And it's also a fairy story, or even just an ancient happening if you're happy to say it happened, that so obviously has zero life relevance for us today, in our dark and hurting world, our post-COVID world, our war-torn world.

Nice for the kids, the nativity story, but not for reality. And that is why the very beginning of Luke's Gospel, which Emily just read for us, should grab us and make us sit up.

If you've got it open in front of you, have a look again, chapter 1, verses 1 to 4, where Luke introduces not just Jesus' birth, but the whole of his life and death and resurrection and so on. And he's speaking to adults, and he wants us up front to know with certainty. He wants us to know with certainty.

Just listen to this beginning again, Luke 1, verses 1 to 4. Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

[ 3 : 05 ] With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

It's a powerful opening. You can't miss the force of it, I think. He's saying, or it's saying here, this gospel account, this account including his birth, is no fairy story, or what Luke would like us to believe about Jesus.

No, no. Look, verse 1, things were fulfilled among us. This man was born and grew and taught and healed and died in public, with tens or hundreds of eyewitnesses seeing the things he said and did. And in the years right after his death and resurrection, eyewitness testimonies were gathered and accounts drawn up of what took place. And then comes Luke, Luke the doctor, a close friend of the apostle Paul.

And in verse 3, with this in mind, And so when you read of an angel and a virgin birth and so on, what you're being told is that this is a thorough, accurate, orderly, true account of Jesus Christ.

[ 4 : 36 ] It's true. To which I guess someone in the 21st century today might say, well, come on, of course, of course Luke would say that, wouldn't he?

At the start. He wants to sell his book or something like that. But it would be a mistake to dismiss Luke's claims here. As Luke writes his gospel account, it's maybe only 30 years after Jesus' death. And all around Luke in that small place, other accounts of Jesus' life are circulating and being tested against the eyewitnesses. And all over the Roman world, churches are springing up, so transformed by what they know of Jesus that they're ready to die for him.

You can't, Luke, just come up with a half-baked, half-imagined story about Jesus, say you're serious about it and expect to be taken seriously.

No, no, in a world where oral witness is listened to and people are serious about what is true and people want to know if they're able and willing to die for this Lord Jesus Christ, Luke writes and tells us that what we have here is careful, truthful investigation and ordering of what really took place, put out in the public arena.

[ 6 : 05 ] So you say, well, why write it? Why do you write this stuff for us, Luke? And verse 4 is why Luke writes. Look, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke's gospel offers us certainty. Rock-solid truth about the in-history, life-changing coming of Jesus.

I think those first four verses are so important. They should encourage us and strengthen us, we who are here this morning.

Lots of us are here this morning, this Sunday morning, because we have put our faith in Jesus. Some of us would say, that's not me yet. Or maybe I did follow him once and I'm coming back to him a bit.

But whoever we are, whatever we say about ourselves, we do want to know what's true, don't we? And so you might ask, what assurance can we have that what we read about Jesus is true?

[ 7 : 08 ] If I'm going to sign up to follow this man with my whole life, is it true? It is pretty normal to go through times when doubts creep into your mind about the Christian faith.

It can come from all sorts of things. Christians rightly talk about what God is doing in our lives at the moment and our experience of him day by day. But it doesn't take many bad days or hard days or lonely days before you wonder, is this stuff I say I believe really true?

It doesn't take much exposure to gently teasing friends before you wonder secretly, this God I can't see, this Jesus that very few people seem interested in, am I mistaken here?

Maybe church is just a weird little subculture. It can nag at you that. It would be terrible, wouldn't it? If I spent my life saying I follow Jesus, but it's all just group belief on top of years of tradition, on top of shaky evidence, on top of nothing.

And we live in a world of fake news. And we talk about post-truth. And we don't know who to believe. Luke writes here because he wants these verses to sink into us, these bold, positive words.

[ 8 : 37 ] What I hold here in my hands, what we've just read, a certain factual account of the birth and life of Jesus. What we read about this coming month, what you read about in the Gospels, is bedrock truth and a secure foundation.

Not what I'd like to think about God. Not what I'm feeling about him now. But the account of what happened when he wonderfully stepped into human history.

So in the lead up to Christmas with nativity plays going on, this is truth to build your life on. Verses 1 to 4.

Know with certainty that... Well, we're going to speed up a bit now. Because in verse 5 onwards, Luke 1 verse 5, we step into the drama of what took place.

And a true recounting of these events. These events that have such world-changing relevance. Here we are. Know with certainty that Jesus will come and reign forever.

[ 9 : 45 ] In verses 5 to 38, which Emily read for us, we meet ordinary people in history. And we meet the living God making his move full of purpose.

Just notice a few things as we move through. Things begin with an elderly couple. Look, verse 5. In the time of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah.

He belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. It was at that time in that place. His wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. She's got a family tree. 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. It's not a sweet fairy story, this. Here's the aching disappointment of two faithful servants of God.

Once, when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

[ 11 : 01 ] So as he stood in the temple in Jerusalem, Zechariah's thoughts, I guess, turned to his wife. And once more he prayed for her and poured out his heart.

When now comes the break in action. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

Do you believe that? This is the world we live in, by the way. Where God is alive and hears prayers and is able to and does step in.

When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Now the kindness of the God who made us. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you're to call him John. He'll be a joy and delight to you and many will rejoice because of his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord.

[ 12 : 04 ] He's never to take wine or other fermented drink and he'll be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he's born. This is where the story starts. Two pensioners, Zechariah and Elizabeth, and their lives taken hold of by a good, joy-giving God.

In verse 16, God's grander purposes are revealed. He, your son John, will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

And he'll 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 righteousness to make a people prepared for the Lord.

In God's great plan in history, John will have one role to play. He will make ready of people prepared for the Lord. He's a forerunner. He's a pacemaker.

He's a one in front. And then the Lord God will come, announces the angel. Just in brackets, we're meant to see how these verses bristle with God's purpose for our world.

[ 13 : 14 ] He's on the move. He's in charge. He's doing something. It is brilliant to know that.

Because imagine you're flying in a plane at 30,000 feet in the air and suddenly things get choppy.

People bashing into each other and elbows flying. And you think, I need to find out what's going on as the plane rocks and rolls. And pushing through the plane to the cockpit door, you go through and in and the cockpit's empty.

No one there. No one at the controls. And you're hurtling through the sky with no one in charge. We say, if that is what our world is like, if we're just hurtling from one crisis to the next with no one at the controls, well, put up sparkly lights and get drunk at Christmas if you want, because there's nothing else to do before we crash and burn in our purposeless existence.

But the Bible says life's not like that. The one who made us is not only there, he's in the cockpit and at the controls, and he's good and kind.

He's flying the plane. And he has a purpose for us and our world. And he's driving his plan forward. Just fast forward in the narrative to scene two.

[ 14 : 42 ] Chapter one and verse 26. And another childless woman. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, because she's pregnant now, because the angel said she would be and she is, 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. We know the story now. The angel went to her and said, greetings, you who are highly favoured. 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 favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son and you are to call him Jesus.

In Luke's gospel, the first mention of him, Jesus, whose name means the Lord saves, the one at the heart and the centre of all God's plans.

In verses 32 and 33, the angel unveils God's purpose for Jesus. It's a massive promise. It's massive. He, Jesus, will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

[ 16 : 05 ] 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.

God's plan and purpose for this miracle child is that he, Jesus Christ, will reign forever and ever in God's world as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

These verses here, that is what's going on in these first stirrings in the darkness. As angels appear and speak and humans tremble with fear, God is acting and stepping into his world.

He's sending a son, a saviour and a king to those who live in darkness and the shadow of death.

Jesus Christ will reign, not just over Jacob's descendants, Jewish people, but over people from all nations.

He will reign in our world for our good. They're the first words in Luke's gospel mention of Jesus and we say 2,000 years later, that's no empty promise.

[ 17 : 20 ] That's no nice words at the baby shower because this Lord Jesus Christ promised was conceived and born and growing up he confronted evil, healed sickness, brought peace, forgave sins, was betrayed and went to the cross and died.

After which the Lord God raised him from the dead and enthroned him in heaven as Lord of all. At which point Jesus poured out the same Holy Spirit who came on Mary and hundreds and thousands and now 2,000 years later, millions upon millions of people, Jews and Gentiles, have turned to Jesus as saviour and Lord and found forgiveness and peace under his rule.

I read this week that there are 55 million Christians in China. I didn't know that. I don't know who's doing the maths. I doubt it's wrong. 55 million, just in China alone.

coming from this tiny promise, this moment, the angel, to Mary. That's where we are today and history continues to move forward.

The plane is still flying with God at the controls. Towards the day when the Lord Jesus Christ will rule unopposed and he'll sweep away those against him and every knee will bow before him and sin and hurt and war and death will be done away with forever and his kingdom will never end.

[ 18 : 54 ] Luke 1, 32 and 33, just in miniature, come back to it, before he's even conceived, God's grand overarching purpose for his world through Jesus spelled out.

Mary, by the way, she hears the angel's promise and in verse 34, she comes back with a question. It's okay to ask questions. How will this be, Mary asked the angel, since I'm a virgin.

What you speak of seems impossible. I'm not married yet. I haven't been in bed with him yet. How's this going to be? 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.

That is when the living God speaks and promises, he delivers. No word from him ever fails. In this world, his purposes will stand for all eternity.

[ 20 : 11 ] And that's Luke 1 this morning. It's just the beginnings of the old, old story of the lead up to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem which we'll celebrate four weeks today.

What's Luke's message? He's telling us this is no fairy story for the kids and it's no ancient, irrelevant happening with nothing to do for us today.

Rather, we're to know with certainty that Jesus Christ will reign forever as King of all. What are you and I meant to do?

We're meant to trust this carefully investigated orderly account. It happened. We're meant to sense the kindness and goodness of the Lord who hears the prayers of the old and barren and favours a scared young woman.

We're to hear the purpose of the Lord God who promises his son will reign forever. Meant to grasp the power of the Most High who brings life in a virgin's womb whose words never ever fail.

[ 21 : 29 ] Know with certainty that Jesus will reign forever and therefore in these weeks leading up to Christmas serve the Lord.

Serve the Lord. Because in verse 38 Mary speaks and in these early chapters of Luke she is a model for us to copy.

The Lord God has broken into her life and spoken to her and troubled her and urged her to not be afraid as he takes over her life for his purposes and her response is so humble and so straightforward.

I am the Lord's servant Mary answered. May your word to me be fulfilled. Then the angel left her.

That is as a creature before her creator she humbly lines herself up with his purposes and places

and places her life in the hands of her Lord.

I'm your servant. May your word to me be fulfilled. Our simple God-given purpose through this coming month and our lives is to find our place under the rule of God lining ourselves up with him and his purposes for his world.

[ 22 : 54 ] As his creatures in humility like Mary I am the Lord's servant. That is I don't know what shocks or surprises or hardships will come my way this month or in the months and years to come but I do know that God is gracious and kind and powerful and I know that Jesus Christ reigns as King of Kings and Lord of Lords and so in my life and family and job and relationships and with my time and energy I am the Lord's servant.

In the run up to Christmas over this coming month I'll submit to God's words and I'll follow his King the Lord Jesus Christ and I will give myself with all my energy to playing whatever small part he gives me in his purposes as the kingdom of Jesus grows.

I'll serve the Lord and you and I should know this coming month that there is no greater privilege there's no greater purpose and actually Mary's about to sing a wonderful song about this in the next bit of Luke's Gospel there is no greater joy than being a servant of the Lord who has come and revealed himself to us grabbed hold of us and said do my will.

Know with certainty this Sunday that Jesus will reign forever so serve the Lord serve him. Let me lead us in a prayer together let's pray.

He will reign over Jacob's descendants forever his kingdom will never end I am the Lord's servant Mary answered may your word to me be fulfilled Lord we praise you our Father that in Luke's Gospel we have bedrock truth to build our lives on we thank you that you stepped into history 2000 years ago revealed yourself sent your son to be king and lord of all thank you thank you that he Jesus lived for us died for us rose from the dead reigns today and will return in a world full of fake news and wonderings about what's true and right please make us those who engage with what you say and line up our lives behind your purposes and your son please show us this month how to live in all humility as your creatures and to serve you and your son

[ 26 : 02 ] Jesus and do your will we pray in Jesus name Amen