
Day 293 - October 20

Jesus the Christ (5 BCE – 30 CE)

The Births of Jesus and John the Baptist

Readings: *Luke 1:5-80; Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 2:1-38*

Reflections:

The Births of Jesus and John the Baptist

- 747 years after the founding of Rome, Jesus is born. Herod the Great has been granted the title, “King of the Jews” by the Roman Senate. Caesar Augustus is Emperor. The region of Palestine is divided into smaller provinces. Judea, Samaria, and Galilee are west of the Jordan River. Perea and Decapolis (which means 10 cities) are east of the Jordan River. Bethlehem and Jerusalem are both in Judea while Nazareth is in Galilee. This is the setting for the birth, life and death of Jesus – a man born into poverty who will be regarded by virtually all scholars as the most influential person in history.
- Luke who obviously did a lot of research in the writing of his biography of Jesus has the longest and most detailed account of Jesus’ birth. It actually includes the birth of his cousin, John who will grow up to be John the Baptizer.
- John’s Birth Foretold: The promise to Zechariah finds parallel to the other miraculous births, particularly Abraham and Sarah’s and no doubt for the Jewish readers helped them make that connection to the founding of their nation.
- The first words from the angel are, “Do not be afraid.” Obviously angelic appearances are very frightening.
- The angels words about the baby John not taking wine (one of the symbols of God’s Spirit) but being filled with the Spirit from birth draws the readers’ attention to the many prophecies about the great outpouring of the Spirit at the coming of the Messiah when people will be changed from the inside out by God’s presence.
- The prophecy about going in the spirit of Elijah is a direct reference to Malachi 4:5 and the promise of Elijah’s return before the coming Messiah. The work of this promised one was both a restoration of righteousness (“to turn...the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous”) as well as a restoration of true relationship (“to turn the hearts of the fathers to

their children”). God is ultimately about relationship, our relationship with him and with those around us.

- Zechariah Made Speechless: When Zechariah doubts the angel and asks how this can be since he and his wife are so old, we see one of the funniest passages in the Bible. The angel says, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God and have been sent to speak to you and tell you this good news!” Gabriel says, “Hello? I am angel standing in front of you. What more of a sign do you need? God sent me personally to tell you this good news (same word we translate for gospel – it is a royal decree of great news). Judgment of silence falls on Zechariah because of his unbelief. This introduces something to the reader. No matter how great the signs are from God, the human heart simply rebels against believing or submitting to the truth of what God is saying. We will see this with the disciples and with the religious leaders. Miracle after miracle takes place and they still don’t believe. Faith in God rests in knowing his heart and humbly seeking, accepting and submitting to whatever he says. Miracles and even the appearance of angels do nothing to create true, lasting faith. The story of Israel underscores this truth over and over again.
- The angel also points out that the promises will come true at “their proper time.” God’s word takes time to fulfill and God has his carefully crafted schedule for what he wants to bring about. A key part of faith is waiting for God’s best in God’s perfect timing. This often takes longer than we like.
- Elizabeth, Zechariah’s wife does miraculously conceive and she believes that this birth removes her disgrace. This shows us how important in that culture for a couple to have children to carry on their family line.
- Mary Told of Conception: Mary is now approached by an angel. Mary is called “you who are highly favored.” Mary was apparently very young, a teenager. She was apparently very poor. What an encouragement to have God say to her that she was highly favored. This reminds us that God delights in the humble but knows the proud from a distance.
- The angel’s statement to Mary is a perfect summary of the prophecies about the coming Messiah. “...you are to give him the name Joshua (we call it Jesus but it was really Joshua, a common Jewish name in the anticipation that the Messiah may be called Joshua after the great leader of Israel’s past).” Jesus is called “holy one” and “son of the Most High.” He will be given the “throne of David” and “his kingdom will never end.” These are all very clear statements that this child is the Messiah.
- Mary declares that she is a virgin and wonders how this will be. What is interesting is that Zechariah is judged as an old man for his lack of faith but Mary as a young girl is not judged for asking a very practical question.
- We see in this account that God is setting up a very scandalous situation. First, the Messiah would suffer under the reputation that he was conceived in adultery. Mary could not escape being viewed as promiscuous. Second, the notion of the “a god having sex with a woman and conceiving a man-god” was a completely pagan, Roman idea that was never a part of

the Jewish anticipation of the Messiah. This declaration to Mary was completely scandalous and defied all of the Jewish nation's religious sensibilities.

- Two key statements from this story. The angel says, "For nothing is impossible with God." This God will make clear over and over again in the story of Jesus even as he has made it clear in the story of Israel. Mary responds, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." This defines humble faith. We are to be God's servants and in serving him, whatever he says, goes. We are called simply to listen and agree with God and in doing so align ourselves with his purposes, even when they seem impossible or just plain wrong.
- Mary Visits Elizabeth: Mary runs to go see Elizabeth. Elizabeth is now filled with the Holy Spirit (another sign of the coming Messianic reign) and prophecies. Mary is affirmed for believing what the Lord said to her.
- Mary Praises God: Mary sings a song as her heart overflows. The theme captures much of what we will see throughout the story of Jesus. God blessing the poor and needy but bring low the proud and strong.
- John the Baptist is Born: John is finally born and Zechariah is released from his silence as he takes the step of faith by naming the son as the angel commanded.
- Zechariah Prophecies: Zechariah is now filled with the Spirit and prophecies. Again we see themes developed here that will continue to unfold in the story of Jesus. "...the rising of the sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." Jesus as the life giver and the prince of peace will become a key theme throughout his life.
- Joseph Told of Conception: We see in Matthew's account the story of Joseph being told about Mary's miraculous conception. They were engaged and so to break the engagement at that point was the same as divorce. Divorce was acceptable in Israel and so all he had to do was write her a certificate and he would be released from his obligation to her. Mary would have to go through the shame of being publically labeled as a promiscuous, adulterous young woman if he did this.
- The angel's words to Joseph are completely aligned with the other words with one addition. Joseph is told that the baby is to be named Joshua (or Jesus) because he will save his people from their sins. This is the first time that we see clearly that God has in focus a spiritual salvation rather than a socio-political salvation from Rome. The great enemy that has taken people as slaves is not the Roman Empire or any human institution but rather the effect of sin holding all people captive to destructive self-centeredness.
- Again we see in Matthew's account that it is made perfectly clear that Jesus is divine. He is called "Immanuel" which means "God with us." In Luke, Matthew and John, all three writers want to make it explicit that Jesus is somehow God with us, God in the flesh, fully divine and yet fully human.

- Jesus the Christ is Born: The Caesar's census is the reason to move Joseph and Mary into Bethlehem. There was no room in the guest room. Traditionally this room was called an inn but really it was more accurately a guestroom at a relative's home. The retreat to the privacy of the stable for the animals and Jesus is laid in the most humble setting, a feeding trough.
- Angels Proclaim Birth: An angel appears to shepherds to send them to the scene of the birth and celebrate this new king. Shepherds were the working poor. They had jobs but were considered of questionable character and were definitely among the lower class. When the angels say, "this will be a sign" they mean that this will be a natural event that has supernatural or divine meaning. A miracle or a wonder is something that is impossible but God accomplishes by his direct intervention. A sign on the other hand is a natural event, possibly marked by improbable timing that is used by God to convey special meaning to those that have eyes to see the sign.
- Suddenly an army of angels appears (interpreted a great host which means army). The belief in Israel was that when the Messiah would appear that he would come with the armies of heaven (Like Elijah in 2 Kings 6:16,17) and would miraculously drive out their Roman oppressors. What is interesting is that this army is not declaring war but rather peace! "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."
- Shepherds Visit Baby: The sign of Jesus being born in a manger is that the Messiah was being born among the poor. This would have huge meaning for the shepherds. The Messiah, their savior, was born into their class and would have solidarity with them.
- Jesus Circumcised and Named: Jesus is circumcised and dedicated as the law required. The offering Joseph and Mary make of two doves or pigeons demonstrates practically how poor they were. Someone of average wealth would have offered a year old lamb and a pigeon as the law required for a first born son. However the Law allowed for the poor to have the option of just offering two pigeons or two doves.
- Simeon Expresses his Joy: Simeon, an aged righteous man is full of the Holy Spirit and so we see here as in Luke's second book – Acts of the Apostles, the Spirit is at work everywhere you turn.
- Simeon's prophetic word adds the final piece to the mission of Jesus. "For my eyes have seen your salvation...a light for revelation to the Gentiles." Here we see this Godly man point toward God's grace that will be extended through Jesus to the Gentiles. Again this is so subversive to the religious convictions of Jesus' day. It is no surprise that Simeon gives this warning to Mary as well as to all who would follow this one called Jesus, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." Jesus would not be the rescuer they had anticipated. He was going to cause a lot of problems, a lot of division, a lot of struggle. His purpose was not to just cause problems for problems sake. His message and mission would ultimately reveal the human

heart and make it plain if people were truly into God and loving other people or if they were just into themselves and their own religious pride. His words are for Mary for as we will see, Joseph will not be present in the adult life of Jesus. Many scholars believe that Joseph passed away before Jesus began his public ministry.

- Anna the Prophetess: Anna then approaches the couple and confirms all of this. Here we see the value placed on women even from Jesus' birth. Also we see the importance of all things being witnessed to by at least two people. The disciples (and later disciples) are sent out in twos. Here we see that everything said about Jesus is confirmed by at least two witnesses. Anna is described as an incredibly godly woman who was married for seven years but then remains a widow for the rest of her life, apparently just married to God. Could this be of particular encouragement to Mary? As we will see, Joseph disappears between the time when Jesus is twelve and thirty. Most believe he dies young. Maybe Anna's words stuck with Mary because she would face much of her life without her husband.
- In all of this we see how incredibly clear God is right from the beginning that he is at work and that Jesus is that one that was promised back in Genesis, the long awaited anointed king, the Messiah (Hebrew word) or Christ (Greek word).