

# Luke 1:1-25

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 18 December 2022

Preacher: Reuben Hunter

[ 0 : 0 0 ] I was walking to the park yesterday with the family and came across some new graffiti just okay walked on a bit further don't waste your time on Christmas it's a con a little bit further Santa is Satan see what they've done a clever little move with the letters it's easy to be cynical about Christmas isn't it particularly if you've been through a few now what was interesting actually we got a bit further somebody had written then Jesus is the

God man and they'd written so like drawn some ichthys fishes so I think this was maybe kind of Christian graffiti but certainly cynical but cynicism I think can easily creep in this time of year maybe you're there at the minute this evening you're thinking to yourself why on earth am I making all this fuss why am I doing this again another year for one day it's just one day what's the point maybe you're asking yourself does this all whatever this all is all the stuff that you do at this time of year does this all really matter does Christmas really make a difference to my life does it actually do anything to address the problems that I face day by day the struggles that I go through the hardships that I have to wrestle with day in and day out it feels in some ways that this time of year with all of the expectation that comes with it that that's just another burden that's just another struggle it's easy to look around I think perhaps like these graffiti artists had done to look around at all the commercialism that we see and the way that the the reality of Christmas that we as Christians understand gets lost in all of that it's easy for us to see that and just to get cynical because we know what Christmas is about we know that we know it's about Mary and Joseph it's about the shepherds watching their flocks we know it's about the angels appearing we've been hearing about that

Sunday by Sunday haven't we over the last few weeks it's about the manger and the baby Jesus it's about those three men with the gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh we know that and if we've been around the church for any length of time we know that it's about the birth of this child bringing God to us God as we heard this morning if you were here taking on flesh and coming to dwell among us what theologians call the incarnation we know that but does that actually have any real meaningful significance for my day to day does that change anything in my life that's a real question and in some ways it's a reasonable question for us to be asking and there's an answer to that question that I want us to see this evening it's an answer that is behind if you like that very first Christmas that Luke describes in the reading that we had just there in Luke chapter one so if you can open that up again page 855 Luke chapter one that's where we're going to be this evening see we may know what Christmas is about but do we know how we got here in the first place do we know the significance of what happened that first Christmas into the context in which it came see the first Christmas doesn't just come out of nowhere there is a backstory and of course it's true that that story the backstory goes all the way back to the very beginning of time again we heard that this morning from John chapter one you could say it goes further back than that into the eternal mind of God but there's also a more immediate backstory to the birth of Christ that we could easily miss and when we perhaps particularly those of us that have been Christian for a while we've been in the church for a long time this season comes around and we read the narratives again and again and again and they're just very familiar but we could easily miss this the backstory of the birth of Christ that is so very important and the reason it's very important is because of the parallels with our day today what I mean by that well Luke in the first four verses of his gospel he's told us his goal in writing he's written it in order to give assurance certainty about the things that have happened but after that verse five he roots us in a very specific time and place with the words look at verse five in the day in the days of king of herod king of judea when he says that he is rooting us at a particular point in history and he's reminding us of the political environment of the day the kind of rule that God's people were under when the events of that first christmas unfolded herod was a jewish king

his leadership was marked we know by two qualities two qualities vanity and insecurity now what that meant is that whatever he did he did to serve himself but he also knew that he was only a pawn in the wider roman empire he was given his commission to rule by mark anthony and so he knew he could be removed at any point so these two qualities marked his leadership vanity and insecurity swagger on the one hand and terror on the other and leaders who use their position for their own ends and who live in constant fear of being found out or kicked out by those above them well they're usually controlling and they're usually very heavy-handed and herod we know was just like that and god's people had to live under that dark and difficult and painful regime to be a christian as it were to use the kind of parlance we would use today to follow god back then under him was very difficult indeed it wasn't popular it wasn't incentivized it wasn't easy but more than that herod ruled from 37 to 4 bc which means there was a further level of pain for god's people to deal with in those days and that is that god hadn't spoken for 400 years there had been no prophets for four centuries of course they still had the words from the previous prophets they still had the promises of god and the history of of uh their life together but generations of israelites had been born had lived their lives and had died without any revelation from god now they knew that he'd made promises they knew that he promised that he would make them a great people that they would be a people who would enjoy his special blessing in a particular place a special land they knew that but what had happened to those promises you see knowing the promises in and of themselves almost made it worse because of what had been promised the hope that was attached to those promises made the fact that those promises didn't seem to be coming to pass all the more difficult living under tyrannical rule under a silent heaven in what felt like very very dark days where is god in times like that now that's a question that our culture has been asking and i think has been asking in renewed ways over the last few years and when things are difficult where is god that question was everywhere during covet i don't know if you noticed that where is god when our leaders take away our freedoms where is god when they stop uh when the state stops us seeing our loved ones and i've noticed that the question comes uh in different forms more recently as well maybe you've noticed this too cost of living crisis where is your god foolish governments that seem to act without accountability where is your god wars conflict all kinds of things being done by people and influence and authority over us that make our lives difficult or make lives terrible for other people where is your god insecure leaders who do what they do to serve themselves and they don't care what effect it has on others where is your god we know too don't we that it's not just the culture that's asking these questions these are questions that we're asking in the church as well these are questions that we as christians find ourselves asking questions that creep into our heads of course we may not verbalize them because well we're christians and we're not supposed to be thinking like that that's what we've told ourselves but yet those questions are there when the darkness closes in in our lives when things are hard for whatever reason the tyranny of others the tyranny of temptation the struggle with our own sin that seems to dog us all the time that oppressive regime of our sinful nature just snapping on our heels all the time it feels like we we resist temptation in one area and then it seems to get us somewhere else and we think where is god when this is going on and it feels like heaven is silent it feels like when we're praying our prayers nothing's coming back what is god doing where do we turn well if we delve into the christmas backstory we meet people who are faithfully waiting in hard times faithfully faithfully waiting in the same kind of struggles that you and i are waiting in and the events that unfold here give us grounds to wait in our lives in faith and with confidence and with hope even when our circumstances are hard with more certainty and more confidence than they had we'll get to that in a minute because before that very first christmas what we see here is number one point number one of two points this evening point number one god breaks his silence that's verses five to twelve verse five in the days of herod king of judea there was a priest named zechariah of the division of abijah and he had a wife from the daughters of aaron and her name was elizabeth and they were both righteous before god walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the lord but they had no child because elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years zechariah and elizabeth who are they and what on earth are they doing here in the story zechariah was a priest and his wife elizabeth a descendant of the highly regarded ironic ironic related to aaron not ironic there's nothing ironic about this priesthood uh uh related to the you might say ironic you know what i'm trying to say aaron that priesthood they're from good stock that's what that means and they're devout verse six righteous before god devoted to his law they are blameless not sinless to be blameless means that they are obedient to the law they're following the

statutes of the law so they've got good heritage they are good spiritually but verse seven they're childless to be childless uh in this context would have been a disgrace to the couple especially to the woman verse 25 look at verse 25 thus the lord has done this for me taken away my reproach there was disgrace that was associated in that culture with that verse 18 we're told time has advanced beyond them on this one we're supposed to see them as a devout godly sincere but largely insignificant couple then one day zechariah is chosen by lot to perform the incense offering at the temple now this is done twice a day so that incense was always burning and the the burning of the incense the smoke going up it symbolized the prayers of the people proceeding up to god now this was a once in a lifetime thing for zechariah he would intercede for the nation in the place where god dwells it couldn't have been any bigger for him the assembled worshipers are praying outside for the redemption for the deliverance of israel from the darkness of herod's rule and it is zechariah's job plain old ordinary zechariah to go in and to offer the incense that it was thought brought these prayers up to god symbolize the prayers passing up to god this was a massive privilege a huge honor for him whatever zechariah felt about that however delighted he was about that however intimidated he was about the responsibility that would be quickly forgotten in light of what happens next look at verse 11 and there appeared to him an angel of the lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense and zechariah was troubled when he saw him and fear fell upon him i bet it did angels in the bible are terrifying creatures boys and girls you know uh when um when you see an angel in

[14:49] in a in a book or something like that it's a fairly innocuous looking kind of uh creature with like wings and um um did i just say innocuous to the children um fairly uh harmless like insignificant uh kind of creature with these kind of wings and whatever and a bit like smiley face and stuff that's not what angels are really like angels in the bible when they confront people the people are terrified and this one we're told verse 19 is called gabriel he shows up zechariah is scared this angel has come from the the white hot holiness the presence of majesty perfection no wonder he's so terrifying but his purpose in coming isn't just to strike fear in zechariah just for the sake of fear fear it is to bring a message from god and verse 19 this message you see is good news i am gabriel i stand in the presence of god and i was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news god is breaking his silence god's word is coming to his people once again centuries have passed heaven been silent god is speaking again heaven is no longer shut up and what i want us to see is that this isn't just significant for zechariah or for those in the days of herod this is rev this revelation is good news for you and me as well you see in our waiting in your pain in your sadness in the frustration of our living under destructive leaders in our living through the personal struggles of our sin this word from heaven all these years ago fires hope down through history it fires hope through the whole cosmos why because the word brings change because we discover our second point god breaks his silence but he breaks his silence in order to keep his promise point number two god keeps his promise the priests drew lots to decide who offered incense drawing lots was like um uh like stick your hand the bag see who gets the who gets the the highest number that kind of thing like a chance type thing but the book of proverbs tells us that every decision is from the lord the lord decides what number you pull out so he's drawn the lot but it's god getting zechariah to where he wants him to be and god is getting zechariah on his own to tell him that he keeps his promise look at verse 13 the angel said to him do not be afraid zechariah your prayer has been heard and your wife elizabeth will bear you a son and you shall call his name john and you will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth for he he will be great before the lord and he must not drink wine or strong drink and he will be filled with the holy spirit even from his mother's womb and he will turn many of the children of israel to the lord their god and he will go before him in the spirit and the power of elijah turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just to make ready for the lord a people prepared zechariah's prayer has been heard he's been told i heard your prayer what prayer well some people think it's the prayer that him and his wife would have been praying for many years to have a baby but i don't think that that's the case because remember where zechariah is he's having his big moment in the temple offering incense for the prayers of the nation

now it's likely that those prayers were set prayers there was a liturgy that went with that and they they were prayers representing the assembled worshipers he was standing in the place that the priest stood in representing the people before god praying prayers on behalf of the people and on behalf of the nation praying for the messiah to come and to rescue his people what's more in the

bible when god intervenes to enable a barren couple to have a child so we think of abraham and sarah and isaac perhaps rachel and jacob with joseph manoa and his wife with samson elkanah and hannah with samuel the child born has a special role in the unfolding promise of the covenant god and that is exactly what we discover is going to happen with this one with the birth of john john who would be john the baptist he will be great before the lord and his ministry will be unique that's why there are these restrictions about strong drink included in there that's why we're told that he'd be full of the holy spirit in his mother's womb this is a special child with a special ministry a special role to play in the purposes of god and what is the ministry his name means god is gracious and he will bring joy and many we're told will rejoice because of him he will bring many of the wandering israelites those who think that god has forgotten him those who think that the silence from heaven has been too long he will bring many of them back to the lord and he will have the spirit and power of elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and he'll turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous and he will do all of this as a preparation for the coming of the lord as the angel speaks as this earth-shattering moment for zechariah in the presence of the heavenly voice as that comes the bells would have been ringing in his head because all that is being described here is the fulfillment of what god had promised previously for the forerunner of the messiah the one who would come before the lord jesus so listen to the very last words of the old testament malachi chapter 4 god's last words before this moment in the temple with zechariah behold says the lord i will send you elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the lord comes and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers lest i come and strike the land with a degree of utter destruction with a curse i don't need to tell you this do i but the bible isn't the story of two gods as is popularly thought by some people the old testament is the bad god the new testament is the good god but that's that's not the case the bible is one story weaving together god's dealings with his people and i suppose to put it crudely the later material is an explanation of how god fulfills the promises of the earlier material the bible is one story with this thread that weaves all the way through and points us to the lord jesus zechariah's name means yahweh has remembered again and that's exactly what's happening exactly what's happening here how did the old testament close it closed with a promise that before the great and awesome day of the lord before the arrival of god's messiah he would send elijah to prepare the way long time ago i went to see you too in concert in dublin and um i went down with some friends and we we we headed to the stadium we went early because we didn't want it was at lansdowne road as was and we didn't want to be miles away at the back so we went early so we'd be up near the front and get a good view now in order to get near the front you need to go hours ahead of time and so we brought our picnic and we brought our stuff and you know a paper and book and whatever and we waited and we waited and the picnic ran out and we'd exhausted conversation with the other party souls that had done the same read the paper think some of us even had a snooze and then the first warm-up act came out and the whole mood changed all of a sudden people were getting up out everything was different people were starting to get excited why not because some random band came on i can't even tell you who they were but because that meant that the real show was about to come he was getting close bono was getting close it's a bit like that with the arrival of john he's signaling to god's people as one author put it the son to be born will fulfill the biblical promises that had spoken of god sending someone to prepare israel for the coming divine visitation gabriel tells zechariah that this will be john's task he's coming to do the job that is going to bring the messiah when john arrives you know the next thing that's going to happen is that the messiah is going to come so god is remembering and he's keeping his promises things are unfolding out of the darkness exactly as god wants you know that in your struggles the delay that you feel for god intervening in your life is only a delay that you feel the heavenly courts things are running exactly the time this was great news for the people in zechariah's day the long-for messiah is coming but how much more joy how much more confidence in god can we have from where we stand from our position in history we're the other side of all that john preceded we can see that the messiah did come he came exactly as planned that first christmas and he did bring salvation to the world as we think about this we have to remember that this backstory reminds us of what came first it is a very human story of silence and sadness a story of drama in the life of one ordinary insignificant couple and that is where god meets his people god meets us in our stories of silence and sadness of the unfolding drama of ordinary people we often uh people often think that christmas is a time to escape reality that's an attitude that lots of people in our culture take isn't it we party and we purchase and we pretend because it numbs the pain of

reality for a while it's a way of getting away from the things that make life difficult but to do that that misses all that was happening the very first time because christmas is a story of reality but there is more to say because look notice how it's also a story of doubt did you see that um as it was read see how zechariah responds to all of this an angel appears the heavens open it's terrifying gabriel speaks zechariah says verse 18 oh no no hang on a sec

how shall i know this verse 18 i'm an old man my wife's advanced in years with all that's gone on you think to yourself come on zechariah think if we'd been there we would have responded differently we would have believed him we would have taken it on faith but let's be honest with ourselves we struggle to trust god's promises in the midst of our own silence and sadness every bit as much you want to say zechariah what's wrong with you but his weak half faith here is more than some of us can muster when god tells us that his plans to save the world to redeem this mess are still on track even though he can't see it christmas rolls around every year we sing the songs we tell the stories of the in-breaking of god into the world the in-breaking of god into the world to save us and to redeem a people for himself light and life to all he brings risen with healing in his wings and it washes over us because we have our own versions of how shall we know this don't we zechariah his reason for not trusting god was i'm an old man and my wife's past childbearing age what is it for you what's the reason what's the functional reason why god can't be trusted in your life what do you see as the problem in your life that's too big for god or the reason why you don't feel that you can trust him the thing that makes you say how can you be doing good in my life god because i don't have this or i have this well listen to this because while zechariah fluffs it and is disciplined it doesn't derail god's plan zechariah is rendered mute so when he leaves the temple and the crowd are waiting for him to pronounce the benediction there's just silence and hand waving it's an ironic judgment isn't it um the god who has broken his silence has rendered zechariah silent don't miss that zechariah's failure here doesn't stop god's plan proceeding elizabeth becomes pregnant the boy will be born and before long christmas will happen god's power and grace will not be thwarted and you will not be saved or otherwise on the basis of the strength of your faith you are saved by christ so bring your doubts to him bring your doubts to him bring your weak faith to the god who keeps his promises and on the basis of those promises will bring you to glory christmas backstory shows us that the god of the manger and the magi has already been pouring out his lavish grace and mercy to undeserving people zechariah and elizabeth demonstrate to us that god is rich in grace and mercy to people who are very ordinary and whose faith isn't absolutely bulletproof people like you and me and because broke the silence because god broke the silence and kept his promise back then we can know with greater confidence that he will do the same in our lives as we wait not for christmas next sunday but for the return of christ in glory when he comes again and all of our struggles and hardships all of our dramas all of the difficulties all of the pain it will be taken up into that great conclusion on that day when the story kind of reaches its end and we'll see then why everything happened the way it did

but until then we can wait with hope not a fingers crossed hope not a kind of hope for the best you know here's hoping but a biblical hope a certain that i'm clinging to the god who keeps his promises no matter what kind of hope because that's what we need when heaven feels like it's silent that's what we need when life is tough that's what we need when there are people who interfere with our lives in ways that make them difficult he kept his word in the past and he'll do it again in the future so yes yes don't fall for the lie of christmas the lie that says it's just for the kids or the lie that says it's not worth celebrating the lie that says oh it's not worth it for one day the lie that says oh it doesn't change anything it does changes everything let's pray