

Luke 1:26-38

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[0:00] If you could turn back to Luke chapter 1, that would be a great help, page 855. If you head to central London, if you go to Oxford Street or Regent Street in April, what you'll find is shops and traffic and crowds of people that make the pavements slow going.

If you go at the minute, you'll get yourself immersed in a sky full of stars display featuring thousands of bright stars floating above the iconic shopping area. I was there recently, and the whole place feels totally different from the norm. It's the same across the city in all kinds of locations at this time of year. Christmas decorations have brought a seasonal transformation.

Take Kew Gardens. If you were to go to Kew Gardens in, say, June, there's lots of grass, there's some trees, there's some exotic plants, and there's a greenhouse. If you go this month, you'll see, quote, three kilometers of enchanting illuminations featuring over 20 dazzling installations, including some cherished favorites and exciting new displays. Stroll through glittering tunnels, admire vibrant lakeside reflections, and marvel at trees gleaming with dual-toned lights.

It's a botanical world brimming with seasonal sparkle. All over the place, at this time of year, ordinary settings are transformed by something extraordinary into places of beauty and light. And when we go back to the first Christmas, as we did last week and as we are doing again this morning, we discover that this combination of the ordinary and the extraordinary actually lies at the very heart of Christmas. It lies at the heart of the whole story. Christmas is all about the extraordinary breaking into the ordinary. That's certainly the point that Luke is making in the passage that we're looking at this morning. So our first point this morning is this. Christmas comes to the ordinary.

[2:13] Christmas comes to the ordinary. In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. So where's it all taking place? Nazareth. It's the Nazareth in Galilee in case there was any misunderstanding or confusion. And that Nazareth is an ordinary place if ever there was one. It says city here in the ESV translation because the Greek word, there is no Greek word for village in this sense. This is a rural backwater on a road between two seaports.

It's a place so insignificant that when people discovered it was going to be the promised birth place of God's Messiah, it was said with surprise, can anything good come out of Nazareth? Nazareth? The backwater of backwaters? Surely if God was going to do something significant in the world, he would do it in a significant place like Jerusalem, the great city at the center of his purposes.

No, no, he chose Galilee. Galilee was a place held in the highest content by Jews, and not just Galilee, but the unremarkable little backwater called Nazareth. Well, that's the place. Then we have Mary. Do you see initially she's just referred to as a virgin, verse 27. A point Luke repeats in verse 28 and verse 34. Now this will be a big deal, but initially all that tells us is that she is an insignificant woman. She's probably in her teens. She's got no husband. She's got no children, and in that culture that meant that she had no status. She is betrothed. That is, she is legally pledged to be married, but in case we think that this will elevate her status in some way, her fiancé, we're told, is hardly royalty. She's not Meghan Markle. He's just ordinary old Joe Davidson.

Do you see that? That's what verse 27 tells us. Joseph from the family line of David. He's Joe Davidson. It's an ordinary place. It's an ordinary girl, and he's an ordinary man. There is nothing, nothing remarkable about this situation at all, and yet it is the starting point for some of the most extraordinary events in the history of the world. Here's the thing. Christmas tells us that God meets us in the ordinary. By calling Mary, God shows interest in, he shows his care for, his grace to the ordinary, the unimpressive, the weak, and the poor. This is very important. So much of what drives our world comes from our quest, the quest for significance that agitates in the human heart, the

desire that we would be somebody, that we would be great, that people would look at us and think, there is a great person. There is an impressive person. We seek to look impressive and sound impressive. We just want to be impressive, because by being impressive, we earn favor in the world.

[5 : 27] How do we get ahead in the world? We do so by being impressive. We're drawn to impressive people. We talk about the fact that we know impressive people. We talk about how wealthy they are, how well-known they are, or how many jolly followers they have on social media.

And we seek to appear that way. Is that not what one of the great things of social media is? About presenting yourself in such a way that you look impressive, that people will be drawn to you. Now, what invariably happens is we think, well, if that's the way we are, and if that is the way the world that we live in is, well, surely God probably feels the same. So God must be on the lookout for impressive people as well. That's not the case. God meets ordinary people in their ordinary lives doing ordinary things. This is one of the very important messages that we mustn't skip over about that first Christmas. You do not need to be anything more than ordinary to receive the favor of God. Our culture has created a kind of rat race where in order to be accepted, you have to speak and act in certain ways. It's the same with every in-group. There are all kinds of different in-groups in the culture, but every single one of them has a way that we have to behave, a way that we have to perform in order to be accepted. The language we use, the clothes we wear, the people that we mix with.

God doesn't require you to be anything other than ordinary. Perhaps you need to hear this this morning. You need to be reminded of this for your own sake, because you feel that pressure to be impressive. You feel that driving you on, and you're trying desperately hard to be the kind of person that the in-crowd would choose to accept. You've set your sights on belonging to that group, and you desperately want to be there, and it is a punishing treadmill of achievement that you feel that you need to make in order to be accepted.

[7 : 32] You also recognize that perhaps there is a degree of acceptance in the crowd that you're happy in, but you know that you're faking it. You know that you're putting it on to some degree, because you know underneath it all you're really pretty ordinary. Here's the thing you need to know.

It's not that way with God. Whatever your state, you do not need to pretend with Him. In fact, it would be the height of folly to do so, because He knows exactly what you're like.

He knows that in the end, all of us are very ordinary. God sees you as you are, and He cares for you as you are.

Perhaps you also need to hear this for the sake of others. You look around at other people around you, whether it's your family or your friends or your church family here, and if you're honest, there's something in you that thinks they're not as together as you'd like them to be.

They're not really as impressive as you'd like them to be. They certainly don't measure up to your standard, and you maybe don't say it, but inwardly, quietly, you're thinking this. There's a little bit of you that looks down on them.

[8 : 49] Well, whoever they are, you need to be reminded of this fact that whoever they are, they don't need to be any more than that in order to please God. Don't despise the lowly things, because God is gracious to the lowly.

Don't seek to be anything other than lowly yourself, because God is only gracious to those who humble themselves and are lowly.

The point is that Christmas tells us that no one needs to miss out on what God is doing. Christmas tells us that God is coming into the ordinary for you, for me, and for those that society ignores and looks down on.

But he does come into the ordinary in an extraordinary way. That's our second point.

Christmas involves the extraordinary. Christmas comes to the ordinary, point one. Point two, Christmas involves the extraordinary.

[10 : 07] First off, God sends Gabriel as his spokesman. Imagine what that must have been like for Mary. There she is in all her ordinariness, in her ordinary place, doing ordinary things, and the radiant glory of the angelic being comes to her and then speaks to her.

This isn't your average afternoon in backwatersville, but there are two particular bits of the story that I want to highlight. The first is this, God's extraordinary promise. The extraordinary promise.

See, Gabriel speaks into Mary's day to announce that God has chosen her. She will receive his grace. And to be clear, just to be clear, she is the object of his grace.

She is not the source of it. Mary has no grace in herself, only the grace that she receives from God. But understandably, Mary is unsure of what is going on.

29, she was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

And the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

[11:08] And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

God promises Mary a son, a son who will be called Jesus. Jesus means the Lord is salvation, which actually wasn't an unusual name at the time.

The thunderbolt really comes in verse 32. Can you see? This child will be great and son of the Most High. This is an extraordinary promise about an extraordinary child.

Great, when it's used like this, when it's used through the Old Testament, it usually always refers to God himself. And Son of the Most High is a kingly title, rather like his royal highness.

And then when Mary is told that her son will be given the throne of his father David and reign over the house of Jacob forever, it is clear that she was going to bear the king that the people of God have been anticipating.

[12:15] The king that we talked about, that was promised right back in Genesis 3, that we got more of a profile of in Isaiah 11, the one who was coming and would be such a threat to the prevailing culture of the day.

We saw that last time. Here is the king, descended of David through Joseph. He will be the divine son, an extraordinary promise about an extraordinary child.

The son of the Most High, his royal highest of highnesses. These are the titles bestowed on him. He is the one who rules and reigns with matchless power. When we see people with significant power around us, it frightens us.

When somebody is powerful, that power frightens us. And there's plenty of anxiety across the Western world at the moment because there are people in our world who hold a lot of power who appear to be fairly unpredictable, if we're honest, and who appear to use that power in unhealthy and destructive ways.

Yet, there isn't a political leader in the world who has the sort of power that Jesus has. His power is ultimate. Again, you think about that here as one with ultimate power in the world.

[13:33] Is that not a bit scary, given what we've seen and how we see people use power? Well, don't forget his name. Jesus' supreme power shouldn't cause us to fear because his name reminds us that he uses his power for the good of others.

He is the Savior. Jesus, God, is our salvation. He will be born. He will live. And ultimately, he will die in order to rescue men and women from their sin.

He is our Savior. The extraordinary promise of Christmas is that the one born to Mary is the divine Son who comes to save.

Let me ask you this morning, do you know him? Do you know him? Do you know the divine King who came at Christmas in order to save? He has come into the ordinariness of this world and the ordinariness of your life as the Lord of all the earth, but he has done this to bring salvation.

Have you turned from your sin, your rejection of God in his world? Have you turned from your sin and accepted his kingly rule? Christmas promises us that if we do this, he will save us and he will reconcile us to God.

[14:50] If you haven't done that this morning, let me encourage you to do it. You can do it even where you sit. Will you turn and submit your life to Christ's kingly rule and receive his salvation?

The way the story is written, we are supposed to sniff a problem at this point. This extraordinary promise. There is a problem. The fact that Mary is a virgin is underlined.

It's mentioned twice in verse 27. So her question in verse 34 makes sense, doesn't it? Mary said to the angel, how will this be? I'm going to bear a son.

How will this be? Since I am a virgin. We all know how babies are born. So the reality is, how on earth is this extraordinary promise going to happen?

Well, here's the second extraordinary aspect of the story. The angel explains God's extraordinary power, his extraordinary power. And the angel said to her, the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

[15:56] Therefore, the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God. How will a virgin conceive? The Holy Spirit will do it. The power of the Most High will overshadow her.

Now, this whole idea of virgin conceiving, it messes with our categories. But the reality is, if we think and stop for a moment and think about the wider biblical picture, this actually makes sense.

If God was going to act in this way, of course it would come in this way. This has always been how God works. The Spirit was there at creation and he overshadowed the waters of the earth, Genesis 1 verse 2.

He was there at the Exodus when he overshadowed the tabernacle in the glory cloud in Exodus 40 verse 34. He will overshadow Jesus' anointing for his ministry. It is by the Holy Spirit that Jesus makes atonement for sins, Hebrews 9 verse 14.

It is by the Holy Spirit that he was raised from the dead, Romans 1 verse 4. It was the Holy Spirit who Jesus sent to overshadow the church, Acts 1 verse 8.

[17:02] And it is that same Holy Spirit who animates the lives of every Christian to enable us to live, to live for Christ in obedience today. God the Holy Spirit has been overshadowing God's people and God's plan from the very start.

But this extraordinary miracle is one of a kind. Luke is describing and recording for us the historical reality of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. This is a miracle.

The incarnation, that is God taking on a human nature, is a foundational truth that Christians have always confessed. We did only a few moments earlier together. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.

Theologically, it is essential that if Jesus will be a fit redeemer for the world, if he will be a suitable savior as he's been promised to be, he must be both fully human and fully divine.

So for Jesus to be a man, he had to be born of a woman. But if he had been conceived by Joseph the regular way, he would have been nothing more than a man. For him to be sinless and divine, he needed to be conceived by the Holy Spirit.

[18:15] That's why it happens this way. God's power working in Mary's womb is inescapably miraculous. We are unashamed of that.

Now I say that and recognize that this may indeed be the point at which you depart from the Christian faith. You leave us at that point. You like all the stuff that we say about Jesus being the sort of person that he is, but the way he came into the world, you think, I can't have it.

I don't mind his teaching. He's an impressive leader for sure. I can accept perhaps that he even spoke for God, but you struggle to accept that he is God. And that as Mary and Joseph looked into the manger, they were looking into the face of the eternal son of God most high.

You struggle with the idea of virgin conception. Well, let me say, if your starting point is that there is no God, as some will say, then the question of God becoming man in a way is irrelevant.

If there is no God, then he couldn't have been born as a baby, obviously. But if your starting point is that there is or even could be a God who, as Christians believe, created the universe, then surely, if that's the case conceptually, he is capable of entering that universe.

[19:33] So why would we be surprised that he can do what he wants to do in the world that he has made? One author says this, In the last century or so, humanity has worked out how to bring about conception without sexual intercourse.

A hundred years ago, that idea would have seemed impossible and not worthy of being believed. Now it seems plausible and obvious. If doctors can do it in their way, do we really want to say that God can't do it in his?

God the Son, being born of a virgin, is a mystery that we will never fully understand, but not being able to understand how God became one of us is not proof that he did not become one of us.

The Bible's answer is that the extraordinary power of God is what is at work in Mary's womb. In truth, I think that the discussion about this, the controversy, if you want to call it that, about this question, whether Jesus was conceived or not without a human father, I think the controversy is there because deep down we don't want to accept the implications.

We don't like the fact that he is the Son of the Most High. As we said last week, we are threatened by a king who can claim complete authority over us and demand our complete allegiance.

[20 : 56] At a time in our culture when individual autonomy and freedom is about the most cardinal virtue there is, the idea that there is one who was born into the world who has authority over us, whether we like it or not, is an idea that we just can't stomach.

As a culture, we're drunk on the idea of personal freedom. Anything or anyone who stands in the way of me having the right to be free to choose to do whatever I want to do with my life, that person should be resisted or rejected.

But here's the thing. What if the one who is calling you to curtail that freedom actually has the authority, legitimate authority, to do that and they know what's best for us?

And the way that they demonstrate their complete control, the authority that they have, is by entering the womb of an ordinary girl in order to serve us.

Christian story, you see, tells us that the God who made the world entered his world not first to punish those who were rebelling against him but to save. Jesus, born of a virgin, in order to fulfill his name, the Lord saves.

[22 : 17] God's extraordinary power at work in Mary will conceive this unique son. And while Mary's head is spinning, while she's trying to get her head around this whole craziness, Gabriel mentions her cousin Elizabeth and how she has got on in this supernatural childbirth thing as well.

Look at verse 36. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son. And this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. A barren womb or a virgin womb?

It doesn't really matter. Why? Verse 37. For nothing will be impossible with God. Into the ordinary, God brings an extraordinary promise that will be brought about through his extraordinary power.

The question for all is, the question for you, the question for me is, how will we respond to this news? What will we do with this information? You can say, yeah, yeah, another Christmas sermon and you can brush it off, not think about it, just throw yourself into the busyness of the festive season for another year.

It's easy to do that. There's so much going on. We're so busy. We've got so many commitments. I'll think about it. I'll think about that another time. Or you can do what Mary did.

[23 : 40] Verse 38. Mary said, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word. Let it be to me according to your word. She's not saying, ah, okay, I see what you mean.

It's all clear. Nor is she saying, awesome. I'm looking forward to explaining this to my fiancé. And I'm really up for the shame that this is going to bring in the culture and in the village.

She's not saying that. She's saying this. It doesn't all make sense to me, but I'm going to trust. Let it be to me according to your word.

And for some of us, that is what we need to do. Some of you, you're looking into Jesus, but there's no dramatic moment of clarity or emotion. There's no amazing sense of joy, but you believe what you see here is true and there's nowhere else to go.

You haven't had all your questions answered. There's lots that you still need to work out, but you believe it's true and you know that there's nowhere else to go. You know that there is only one Savior. And in that case, all you can do is what Mary does here.

[24 : 55] Submit yourself in faith to God and to His ways. You turn away from your sin, repent of your sin, and submit yourself to God. And open your Bible and say, I'm going to follow wherever it takes me, no matter what the cost.

For some of us who've been Christians for a while, we need to return to this if we're honest with ourselves. Let it be to me according to your word.

Our lives aren't going in the direction that we thought they would or we wanted them to. And things are difficult and we doubt God's goodness and we're worried about the consequences of where He has us.

And we need to acknowledge the goodness and the power of God and simply trust Him. Despite our fears, we need to say, I am your servant. I'm not anyone else's servant.

I am your servant. Let it be to me according to your word. Lord, this first advent shows us a God who comes into the ordinary in an extraordinary way.

[26 : 08] And He does that to transform the lives of all who will trust Him in the way that Mary does here. Wherever you are this morning in your relationship to the Lord Jesus, the one who came at Christmas to save and to reconcile us to God, wherever you are in your relationship to Him, Mary is our example.

I am your servant. Let it be to me according to your word. Let's pray.