December 21st

Luke 1:1-25

This season is truly like no other time of year. It's nostalgic, warm, and there's a sense of anticipation in the air! People seem a little more kind and loving, more willing to give of their time and treasure to others. Yet Christmas can magnify the ache of loss and remind us of those missing from our dinner tables. We've spent the last few weeks walking through seasons of loss and promise, victories followed by defeat, but the common thread has been the faithfulness of a God who has never given up on our redemption.

For generations, God's people held on to the promises spoken through the prophets, waiting for their Messiah. Of course there was anticipation, but perhaps there was also uncertainty about *when* and *how* God would fulfill His promise. Between Malachi (the final book of the Old Testament) and the New Testament, there were approximately 400 years without a recorded prophetic word announcing the coming King. These “Silent Years,” as they became known, intensified the tension between discouragement and hope.

Someone who was uniquely familiar with this tension was Zechariah, the priest mentioned in Luke 1:5–24. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, much like Abraham and Sarah, were unable to have children and were well along in years. While Zechariah was performing his priestly duties, the angel Gabriel appeared, announcing that their prayers for a child had been heard. As Malachi had prophesied, this son would prepare the way for the Messiah *(Malachi 3:1)*. To say Zechariah was surprised would be an understatement. In Luke 1:18 he asks, *“How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”* Gabriel identifies Zechariah’s response as unbelief. Zechariah did not believe the words of the angel, despite the history of Israel being littered with examples of God working miraculously through infertile couples. The result for his unbelief was that Zechariah was made mute - forced to wait in silence as God’s promise would unfold.

If we're honest, Zechariah's response is probably familiar to each of us. Maybe God's love seems “too good to be true,” or perhaps we've walked faithfully with God for years and He's asking us to trust Him with something that doesn't fully make sense. Soon after the back of his promised son John, God returned the voice of Zechariah. And just as the angel prophesied, the voice of John became the *“voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord!’” (Isaiah 40:3; John 1:23)*

God is inviting us to trust Him today. We may not understand every detail, but we are called to trust. We are called to believe that He is at work. How is God inviting you to trust Him this Christmas season?

December 22nd

Luke 1:26-38

Some of us recoil in disgust at the very thought of insects; particularly - large, jumping insects like the grasshopper. Others, however, exhibit quite a different response - one of a curious wonder and love, seeking to grab every insect that they can get their hands on. One response is of fear, or disgust, that prompts avoidance. The other response is of curiosity and wonder, which leads one to seek it out. Our responses to situations in life really do affect the way we experience them. The first few chapters of Luke gives us several responses worth observing as we approach the arrival of the Savior.

Yesterday, we discussed Zechariah's response. Today, we'll sit with Mary as she receives the news that would change the course of human history. The time had come. The Redeemer was about to arrive. But in a way that only God could orchestrate, He chose another unlikely person to carry the Savior of the world. Another angelic visit from Gabriel - this time to a humble, unassuming young woman - a virgin, who was told she would give birth to the Son of God.

In contrast to the response of Zechariah, Mary does not demand reassurance before she could believe. However, she does not understand how this prophecy could happen, because she was a virgin. As mentioned previously, there are many miraculous births recorded throughout the Old Testament. However, there was no precedent for a virgin conceiving a child. But despite her inability to comprehend the plan of God, we see Mary's tender faith and complete trust in her response: *“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.”*

Mary's response is both beautiful and humbling. Beautiful - because of her faith and surrender to God's promise and plan. Humbling - because that is not always our natural response. She did not know how everything would unfold, including what a very traditional and religious society may think of her pregnancy. Yet she trusted the One who had spoken. Mary may not have had a previously recorded story of a miraculous virgin birth to lean on, but she had generations of evidence that God was faithful to His word. And now, through her, He was making a way for humanity to be freed from sin and death.

We all need reminding that the Lord is with us. The peace and steadfastness that flows from trust in a God who is with us, is priceless. We may not always understand every detail of what God is doing, but we can always trust His faithfulness. Mary didn't know all that her "*yes*" would require, nor could she possibly understand the impact her "*yes*" would have on generations to come! But what an example she has become for her total surrender to God's plan, despite not knowing what lay ahead.

How might this type of obedience, faith, and trust change our lives? What might it look like for us to live with that same posture of surrender, even when we cannot see what lies ahead?

December 23rd

Matthew 1:18-25

Have you ever been so excited to share the most incredible news, only to have it fall flat? Imagine the scene of Mary telling Joseph that she was pregnant. It is fairly reasonable to estimate that Mary likely shared important details with Joseph - *"This pregnancy was through the Holy Spirit! This was the long-awaited hope of Israel and all of Creation!"* But no matter the fantastical elements of Mary's story, Joseph still had to reconcile that the woman he was pledged to marry was pregnant…and he was *not* the father. Could he really believe what he was hearing?

In Matthew 1:19, Joseph had determined that he would divorce Mary quietly, so as not to disgrace or shame her. Although they were not officially married yet, their engagement was legally binding, and ending it required a divorce. Joseph was intending to make what he likely thought was a considerate exit from the marriage. But this decision could have had devastating consequences for Mary, leaving her vulnerable to shame, rejection, and potentially poverty.

But…*"…an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins"…[and] "****When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife****." - Matt. 1:20-21, 24*

An angel of the Lord makes another visit - this time to Joseph. Following this visit, Joseph's mind is completely changed. Whatever his initial thoughts were, when God spoke, Joseph humbly obeyed - no questions asked. We aren't told everything Joseph was thinking or feeling. Surely, he understood that marrying Mary would bring questions and challenges he hadn't anticipated. Yet he obeyed and stepped out in faith.

Through each and every chapter of our Advent journey, there has been joy and promise, but there has also been a cost. Following God on the great adventure He invites us into is never promised to be a life of ease and comfort. People invited into God's story of redemption often face uncertainty, sacrifice, and circumstances they can't fully understand. But their willingness to obey places them right in the middle of God's extraordinary rescue mission.

Jesus' rescue mission would ultimately cost Him everything. The One who left His throne to be born in a lowly manger would one day give His life to redeem us. The same God who invites us to give everything for Him is the same One who gave everything for us.

Mary responded with surrender. Joseph responded with obedience. And now, as we anticipate the arrival of our Savior, what will your response be?

Christmas Eve

Luke 1:57-59

Have you ever wondered why the birds go quiet in the evening and sing as the sun rises? As the darkness settles and the temperature cools, many birds become quiet for the night. But as the sun rises, the birds begin to sing. They can't help but sing; it's in their wiring. Something in them - through the long, cold night - longs to celebrate the warmth of the sun, the relief of light, and the hope of something new.

Ever since the Garden of Eden, all of creation has felt this longing for the hope that comes from the rising sun after a dark night. This hope and anticipation is what we've seen unfolding throughout the Old Testament, ultimately leading us here - to Christ at Christmas.

Earlier in Luke 1, Zechariah's skeptical response, in opposition to a hopeful faith, led to his temporary inability to speak. In Luke 1:57–63, his wife Elizabeth gives birth to the miraculous baby boy promised by God. When there was a question about his name, ***this time*,** Zechariah faithfully obeyed God by writing on a tablet, "*His name is John*." Immediately following Zechariah's now obedient response *"his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God." (Luke 1:64)*

Zechariah's immediate reaction to the fulfillment of his hope was praise! Just like a bird in the morning, he saw the hope before him and started to sing! Filled with the Holy Spirit, he began to prophesy about the coming King. Not his own son, John, but the One for whom John would prepare the way. Line by line, his prophecy speaks to the generations-long anticipation of the Messiah.

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child [John], will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins..." Luke 1:68-77

Zechariah concludes his prophecy with the thrilling hope that comes into focus with the coming of Christ: *"...because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising 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." Luke 1:78-79*

There is an inexplicable joy that shines through Zechariah's prophecy. He is hopeful and joy-filled in the peace that the Messiah will bring through the love of God. Just like the birds at sunrise, Zechariah can't help but sing.

The long night of waiting was coming to an end. The rising sun was on its way.

Christmas Day

Luke 2

Imagine yourself sitting on a front porch, watching the sun rise. Well before the colors change and the birds sing, everything seems so dark. Sound and spoken word are the easiest ways to orient yourself in the darkness, but it's hard to pinpoint exactly where you should look.

Gradually, however, the sky begins to change. Slowly, the sky moves from darkness to an array of beautiful colors. Clouds begin to assemble in an order you wouldn't have expected, but that somehow brings you to serenity. And then… you see the sun. The warmth begins to permeate the landscape, and an unstoppable light washes over everything.

This feeling - this unquenchable hope - is how all of Creation experiences the birth of her Messiah.

This Advent season, we've walked through the Great Redemption Story. From the beauty of Creation to the brokenness of the Garden, through generations of promises, failures, victories, and waiting, we've witnessed the faithfulness of a God who has never given up on humanity. And now - the time had come. The Redeemer arrives.

In Luke 2, Mary gives birth to her firstborn son, wraps Him in cloths, and places Him in a manger. And yet, this baby was no ordinary child. This is the arrival we've been waiting for! The One through whom all things were made had now entered the very world He created. The Savior of the world had arrived – *not* in the grandeur of a palace, but in the humility of a manger. John 1 takes us all the way back to the beginning of the story:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.” (John 1:1, 3-5, 9)

The promises made to Abraham, the deliverance pictured through Moses, the kingdom promised through David, and the hope proclaimed by the prophets were all pointing us to Jesus. The darkness had not won. God's promises had not failed. The Redeemer had come. He is here. And He loves you!

The God who created you made a way to redeem you. He has longed to restore the relationship that was broken in the Garden, just as our innermost being has called out for Him in ways we may not even have words to express. Through Jesus, God invites us to experience the hope, joy, peace, and love that come from knowing Him. ***The long-awaited Light has come, and the darkness cannot overcome Him.***

May you be blessed by His arrival this Christmas. May the warmth of His eternal light shine upon you, filling your heart with a deep, abiding joy that sustains you all the days of your life.

As we celebrate His arrival, may our hearts spring up with that same hope and anticipation as we await His return.

Our King has come. And He is coming again!