



BelPres Church

When Emmanuel Arrives

Luke 1:5-39

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God, we thank you for your faithfulness. And I pray that these next few moments, as we turn to hear from your scripture, God, that you take these words and make them yours so that we hear directly from the throne room this morning. We leave here looking more like you, Jesus. It's in your name that we pray. Amen.

Well, good morning, BelPres. Good morning and happy almost Christmas. Love worshiping with you guys, especially in the Christmas season. My name is Annie Duncan. I'm the executive pastor here. A couple weeks ago, my nephew Jack was playing in a really critical soccer match. It was the semifinals and they went on to win the whole championship. But in this particular semifinal game, Jack got a yellow card. Now, I know, scandalous.

What you need to know about Jack is he is the nicest kid. He is such a huge heart for people and he would never hurt anyone intentionally. But during the game, he did something that was a little bit too aggressive and boom, out came the yellow card, to which his younger brother, who is on the sidelines, immediately yelled, "Oh man, I owe Jack \$5."

Apparently, Harvey had a talk with Jack before the game and said, "Jack, this is a really critical game and you don't play aggressive enough, so I will give you \$5 if you play so hard that they give you a yellow card." Brothers, right? Harvey thought this was a safe bet because he had never seen Jack get a yellow card before. It was the unimaginable, and yet it happened.

And we see a lot of that in the Christmas story, the unimaginable. It had never happened before. And we see a lot of that as we read through the Christmas story. And this fall, we have been talking about this theme of unleashed, and looking at the ways that Jesus unleashes us from the things in our lives that hold us back. And then Jesus shows us a different way to live.

And last week, Pastor Scott looked at the Christmas story about the three wise men and the way that we see this theme of unleashed unravel and people being set free in that story. And this week, we are going to walk through Luke 1. And if you have your Bible with you, I know this isn't something we talk about a lot, but we will in 2026, so start bringing those Bibles. But if you have your Bible with you, get it out, turn to Luke 1, because there is something really, really cool that happens here in the Christmas story. And we may be very, very familiar with it, but there's something cool that happens.

And the text that we're going to be looking at is Luke 1 verses 5 through 39. And that is a pretty long chunk of text to read. And so I'm just going to give you the overview and point out a few key verses. So follow along again, if you have your Bibles with you.

So Luke 1, we have two births that are foretold, John the Baptist and Jesus. And both of these births are foretold by the angel Gabriel. And both of them are miraculous. And the people that got to experience firsthand the miraculous were Elizabeth and Mary.

And Luke 1 begins up in the hills in Jerusalem, in the middle of the city, inside the temple. And the temple, it's run by priests. And one of the priests, Zachariah, was working inside the temple when an angel of the Lord appears to him. It's the angel Gabriel. And the angel Gabriel appears and says, "Do not be afraid, Zachariah, your prayer has been heard."

Now, somehow, this angel knew what Zachariah had been praying, but we don't, so we need a little bit more context here. So a bit more about Zachariah. We already know he's a priest. He's married to Elizabeth. And both of them, scripture says, were righteous, but they had no children. And why does scripture say it like that? It's because in those days to not have kids was seen as a disgrace. It was like something was wrong with you. And so scripture points out, they were righteous, but they had no children. And they were very old. So their chance to have kids was long gone. So that's probably the prayer that Zachariah was praying, to have a child.

So back to Zachariah and the temple then. The angel appears. Zachariah is totally freaked out by this angelic being. It's nothing he's ever seen before. And the angel says, "Your prayer has been heard. Your wife is going to conceive. You're going to have a baby, and you will name him John."

Now, if I'm Zachariah, I'm not only afraid of this angelic being that's before me, something I've never seen before, but I'm also a little bit annoyed at what this angel is saying to me. My prayer has been heard. We're going to finally have a kid. You mean after all the years of us praying to conceive? We actually stopped praying that prayer because we're so old now. We've given up. That's the prayer that you're saying has been heard and is going to happen? How can that be?

So Zachariah responds to the angel, "How can that be? My wife and I are old." In other words, it would take a miracle for my wife to conceive at this point. Lucky for them, though, the angel Gabriel is in the habit of delivering miraculous news. And the miraculous does happen. But because Zachariah questioned the angel Gabriel, he is made mute and he can't speak.

And spoiler alert, we're not going to get there in Luke 1, but later on when the baby comes, Zachariah can speak again because he makes sure that they name the baby John, just like the angel Gabriel told them to.

So then Zachariah goes home to his wife. She miraculously conceives. And then there's this really interesting verse in scripture that says in verse 24, if you're following along, Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.

Seclusion? Why does Elizabeth go into seclusion? The Greek word here that's used for seclusion is better translated as hide. So Elizabeth went into hiding for five months. There's no historic custom that says that that's what women did during pregnancy. So why was Elizabeth hiding? Why was she isolating herself?

Her husband's mute, the miraculous and completely unexpected has happened to her, and in the midst of all of that, she puts herself in seclusion. So we don't really know why Elizabeth was hiding. That's the last detail of the story before it shifts to another birth being foretold. But don't forget about our hiding Elizabeth, because we're going to come back to her.

So the story shifts and this time the angel Gabriel appears to Mary. And Mary, like Zachariah, is completely troubled and afraid of the angel. But the angel Gabriel says, "Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You will

conceive and give birth to a son, and you were to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the Most High.”

So the angel tells Mary to not be afraid, and then gives her terrifying news that she’s going to miraculously conceive. And not only is she going to have a baby, but this is a big deal kind of baby, because she’s to name him Jesus, which means God saves.

And Mary, again like Zachariah, questions this and says, “How can this be? I’m a virgin.” And the angel Gabriel says that the same Holy Spirit that brought life out of nothing in Genesis 1 will generate life in her. God will bind God’s self to humanity in the conception and birth of Jesus. Whoo, holy smokes, right?

This is a mic drop moment. Whether you’re familiar with the Christmas story or not, we can’t underscore just how utterly unimaginable this is. A virgin is going to conceive. God is going to come in person. Those things had never been done before.

And so here’s Mary, of low status, young, from a small town, but having found favor with God and hearing such shocking news. So while Mary is letting this all sink in, and right before the angel Gabriel leaves her, the very last thing that he says to Mary is this: even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age. And she who is said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month, for no word from God will ever fall.

So guess what Mary does next? She doesn’t sit down and have a good cry. She totally could. This is very overwhelming news. She doesn’t go and tell Joseph, who she’s engaged to be married to, that she’s about to have this supernatural child. “What do you think about that, Joseph?” She doesn’t go and eat a bunch of ice cream because, wow, this was just a really, really emotional experience, and she needs something to just unwind.

No, the very next thing that scripture tells us is that Mary got ready and hurried to Elizabeth. And I mean, wouldn’t you do the same thing? You’ve just heard life-altering miraculous news. And so she went to someone who is also experiencing life-altering miraculous news.

Now, sometimes when I’m reading scripture, I like to imagine how some of these stories went down. I like to put myself in the scene and visualize how some of these exchanges happened. And so this next part, we’re going to do that. It’s like the Annie commentary of Luke 1. So you’re not going to find this in Luke 1,

but it's the "what did this look like?" "What did it sound like?" "What might have it felt like?"

Because all we're told in scripture is that Elizabeth and Mary were relatives. We don't know if they were close relatives. We don't even know if they'd even met before, because they lived about a three days journey apart. So there's a chance that they'd heard about each other, but they'd never met each other.

And Elizabeth was old. I mean, let's say she's in her late 80s. Can we agree that that is old? I want to be careful here. Yeah? Okay, she's old. And Mary is young. She's a teenager.

And so Elizabeth, she's been hiding out for five months, and then this teenager, Mary, shows up at her door. And this maybe is what that would have looked like, felt like, sounded like.

So knock, knock, knock. Zachariah opens the door. Zachariah is mute, so he just stands there. And what does he see? He sees a young, probably a bit dirty and dusty teenager. And I'm guessing Mary is just filled with nerves and anticipation, because she has just hurried a three days journey. She's probably cut it down to two, because she wanted to get there so quickly to see, is Elizabeth experiencing what I'm experiencing?

And so she's nervous, and she probably says something like this to Zachariah: "Hi, I'm Mary. We've never met before, but hi, I'm a relative of Elizabeth's, and it's really important that I see her, because, oh my gosh, like the other day, this angel appeared to me, and he said that I'm going to have a baby, and I know, I know, I'm not even married. But he said I'm going to have it, because it's something God's going to do to me, and I'm totally shook. So I had to hurry here. I made it in like two days, record time. But I had to see, because the angel Gabriel said that something similar was happening to my relative Elizabeth. I mean, is she here? Can I see her? Is she here?"

And so Zachariah, again, he's mute. He just nods, and maybe his eyes go wide. Interesting. The same angel that appeared to me appeared to Mary. Whoa. So now he's shook, and he shuffles off to go find Elizabeth. But he has to write everything down, because again, he can't speak, so he has to give her notes.

And because he's a man, he probably lacked in details, so go with me here. He has to write notes. "There's someone at the door." "And get to the point, Zachariah." "Who's Mary?" "I don't know, Mary." "She says she's your relative." "I don't know Mary. Tell her to go away. I'm just coming out of seclusion."

Another note. "You're going to want to see her." "Zachariah, leave me alone. You're bothering me." Final note. "Get to the point." He finally gets there in like the fifth note. "She saw an angel too. She's going to have a miraculous baby too."

Now that gets Elizabeth's attention, right? Whether it was Mary that came to Elizabeth and got her out of seclusion, or Elizabeth had just been coming out of hiding, we don't know. But Mary ends up staying with Elizabeth for three months. Three months. This was a three month vacation she had not planned. This was a three month company that you did not expect.

But what is so cool about this story is that these women were intentionally brought together. The unimaginable and the miraculous continues because, yes, their births are miraculous, but them being brought together is also miraculous.

So let's look at three points here of what we know about Mary and Elizabeth. So the first, we just said, both their births are miraculous. Mary and Elizabeth could not have been more opposite. Elizabeth was married to a priest. She was well to do. She lived comfortably in a big city. She had lived a long life. She had experienced a lot. Mary was poor, lived in a small no-name town, and had the majority of her life in front of her. And yet, the thing that they shared was the miraculous. They both miraculously conceived.

So second, Mary and Elizabeth, these women needed each other. Despite them being so different in every aspect imaginable, these women were brought together and they needed each other.

Remember, as soon as Mary heard the news of her miraculous conception, she hurried. She dropped everything and hurried to Elizabeth's side. Mary's moment of miraculous crisis, the person she ran to was Elizabeth, not her mom, not her best friend, but Elizabeth. Mary needed to be with someone who was a few months ahead of her.

Mary needed Elizabeth, and Elizabeth needed Mary. In her seclusion and hiding, Elizabeth had probably thought to herself more than once, no one understands what I'm going through. Enter Mary. Mary understands.

Mary probably had no idea that her running to Elizabeth's side would bring comfort and encouragement to Elizabeth, too. These women needed each other.

This fall, we've been talking about sacrificial living and how to steward our time, money, and influence for God's kingdom purposes. And we see this theme here in the Christmas story.

Mary ran to Elizabeth because of the influence that Elizabeth could have on her, the experience that Elizabeth had being a few months ahead of her in her miraculous conception and all. Who else would Mary want to turn to except for Elizabeth?

And Mary gave Elizabeth the gift of time. It says that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months. Three months. That's a long time, especially when you weren't expecting company. But we can gather that Mary stayed with Elizabeth until Elizabeth had her baby.

So Elizabeth, letting Mary stay with her, gave Mary her influence. And Mary, staying with Elizabeth for three months, gave Elizabeth the gift of time.

And I don't think either Mary or Elizabeth would have said what they did for one another was sacrificial. I think they just thought it was what we were doing because it was what we saw was in front of us. And sometimes, that's what sacrificial living is. That's what sacrifice feels like. It just feels like I'm going to keep doing what I see God putting in front of me.

And that brings us to this third miraculous point about Mary and Elizabeth. God brought them together. God didn't need to bring Mary and Elizabeth together in order for their miraculous birth to take place. God didn't need to do that, but God did. And that is the beautiful point here. God did bring them together.

The angel Gabriel said to Mary right before he departed, "By the way, your relative Elizabeth is also going to have a miraculous birth." There is no way that Mary could have known that, because communication didn't go as fast as we have now. They didn't have phones. They couldn't send an email. There's no way that Mary could have ever known that except for God hand-delivering her that news through an angel.

And in God bringing these two women together, he personified one of his names, one of the names given to Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. God didn't leave Elizabeth alone in her seclusion, but brought his presence through Mary.

And God didn't leave Mary alone in her scandalous pregnancy. It would have been called a scandal, a pregnancy of an unwed mother that would have removed her from social standing. God didn't leave Mary alone in all of that, but God brought Mary his presence through her relative Elizabeth.

And what a beautiful thing that God did here. In the midst of miraculous conception, God gave these women the community that they needed by bringing them together for such a time as this.

This, Bel Pres, is the moment that Emmanuel arrives. Jesus in Mary's womb already living out the name that is given to him, God with us, Emmanuel.

Now, if God had not brought Mary and Elizabeth together, there's a chance that Elizabeth would have continued to be leashed to isolation and disgrace. And if God had not brought Mary and Elizabeth together, there's a chance that Mary would have been leashed to shame, an unwed mother kicked out of her own home. But God did. God did bring them together. And in doing so, unleashed them from disgrace and further leashed them to him and to each other.

And there's something that I say often because I just think it's so true, that God calls us to live a life that we cannot live apart from him, and God calls us to live a life we cannot live apart from each other. This is Emmanuel. This is God with us. We see this in the Christmas story. And this is good news.

So, Jesus, we thank you that you are the God that arrives. You are the God that is with us. Emmanuel, King Jesus, you are our Savior. We thank you for coming. We celebrate your birth and everything that you are. And Jesus, we ask that we experience you and the power of how you arrive this Christmas season. We thank you that you are with us. We thank you that you bring us together. It's in your name that we pray, amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or community group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- How have you experienced a "God with us" moment in your life?
- Where have you been a Mary - going to someone else, needing encouragement?
- Where have you been an Elizabeth - receiving someone into your life and giving them encouragement?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Take the challenging parts of your conversation to Jesus. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.