

Today's Reading: Luke 1:1-9 Bonus: Genesis 17:16-17; 1 Samuel 1:5-11

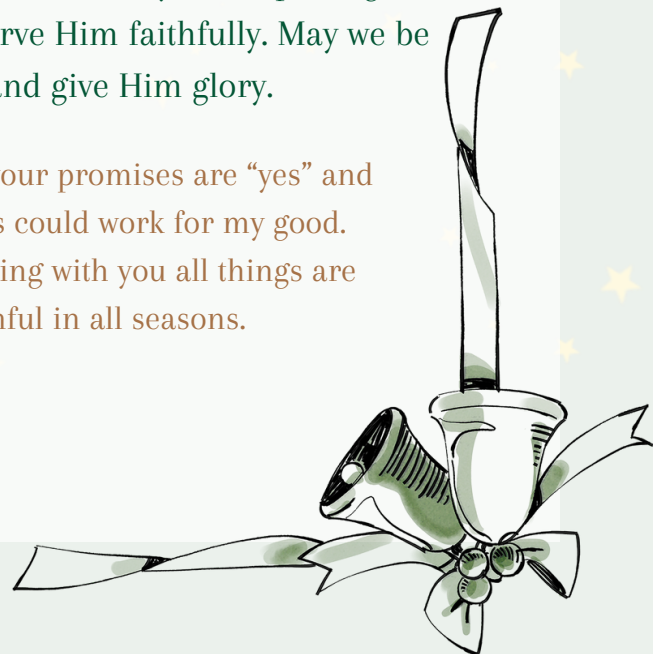
The Gospel of Luke is filled with good news. Perhaps that's what makes it unique. Luke was a historian, physician and missionary. While he didn't know Jesus personally, he was guided by the Holy Spirit. His meticulous research, interviews of eyewitnesses, and efforts to deliver a historically accurate account also provide a compelling narrative.

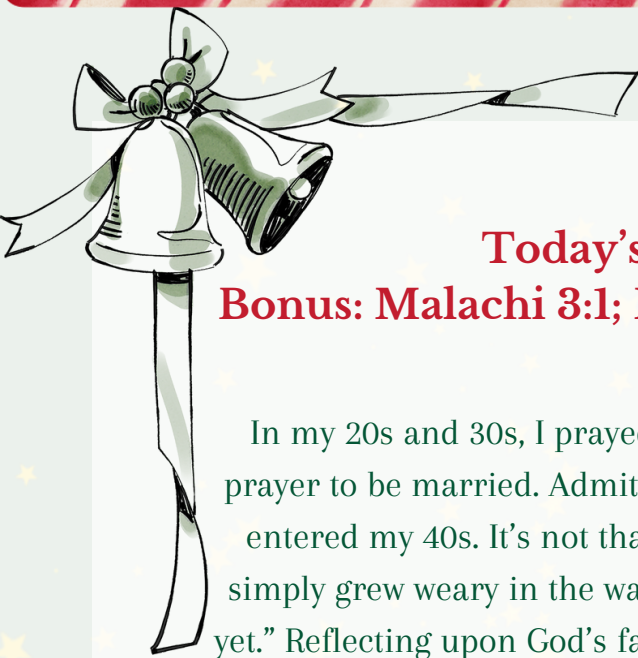
If you're like most women, you love a good storyline with twists and turns, like the goings-on of Hope Valley in the Hallmark series *When Calls the Heart*. The town name alone evokes a sense of optimism. Just as these television characters experience love, loss, joy and despair, we will experience the highs and lows of the life and ministry of Jesus throughout the Gospel of Luke.

In today's passage, we meet the priest Zechariah, whose name means "God has remembered again." He and his wife, Elizabeth, served God and were considered righteous. They were old and had no children; therefore, conceiving a child was no longer in the cards for them. Culturally, barrenness was a source of incredible shame. Imagine their years of sorrow and feelings of rejection! They may have wondered whether God remembered them and possibly questioned His sovereignty. Where was His hand of blessing?

Story plots can quickly pivot, and how God "writes" ours' may be surprising and unexpected. Regardless, we must be willing to serve Him faithfully. May we be people who trust and hope in Christ and give Him glory.

Prayer: Father, I admit that sometimes I forget your promises are "yes" and "amen," especially when I can't see how things could work for my good. Help me place my hope and trust in you, knowing with you all things are possible. May my service to you be faithful in all seasons.





Today's Reading: Luke 1:10-17

Bonus: Malachi 3:1; Romans 4:18-25; 2 Corinthians 4:13

In my 20s and 30s, I prayed fervently and often for the Lord to answer my prayer to be married. Admittedly, I ceased praying specifically for this when I entered my 40s. It's not that I didn't believe God could answer my prayer; I simply grew weary in the waiting. I needed grace to accept God's "no" or "not yet." Reflecting upon God's faithfulness and great love for me, I resumed those prayers, putting my hope in Him. The Lord was not late, and He answered when I was 45.

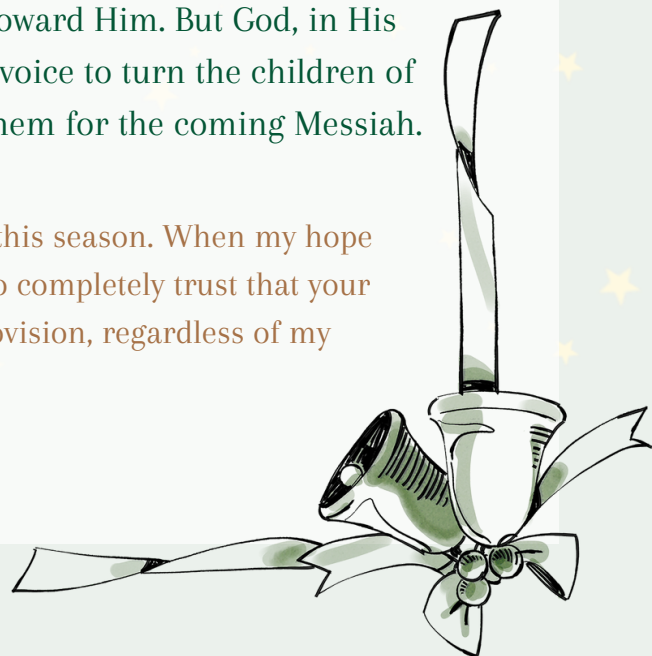
I wonder if Zechariah and Elizabeth paused their petitions for a child after many years had gone by? Did they lose hope and wonder if the Lord had forgotten them?

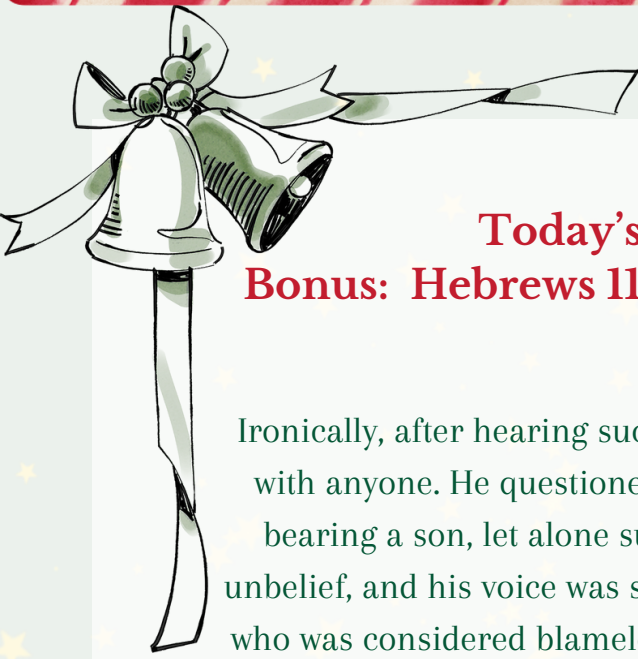
Zechariah was afforded the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to enter the Lord's sanctuary to burn the incense and offer up the prayers of the people of Israel.

Imagine ... his eyes were closed; he felt the weight of the task; when he said "amen," and opened his eyes, the angel Gabriel appeared on the right side of the altar. Cue the fear-and-trembling!

Gabriel's announcement proclaimed that Zechariah's prayer was heard – he and Elizabeth would have a son named John. Furthermore, they would have joy, and John would be great in God's sight. The people hadn't heard from God for 400 years, potentially hardening their hearts toward Him. But God, in His perfect provision, empowered John with a bold voice to turn the children of Israel back to the Lord their God, and prepare them for the coming Messiah.

Prayer: Lord, prepare my heart to receive Jesus this season. When my hope wanes, remind me of your goodness. Help me to completely trust that your answers are always perfect in timing and provision, regardless of my expectation. Amen.





Today's Reading: Luke 1:18-25

**Bonus: Hebrews 11; 2 Corinthians 5:7; Romans 14:23;
Jeremiah 32:17**

Ironically, after hearing such marvelous news, Zechariah could not share it with anyone. He questioned Gabriel regarding the possibility of Elizabeth bearing a son, let alone such an anointed one. His underlying issue was unbelief, and his voice was silenced for nine months. You would think a man who was considered blameless and served faithfully in the temple would not grapple with such deep matters of the heart.

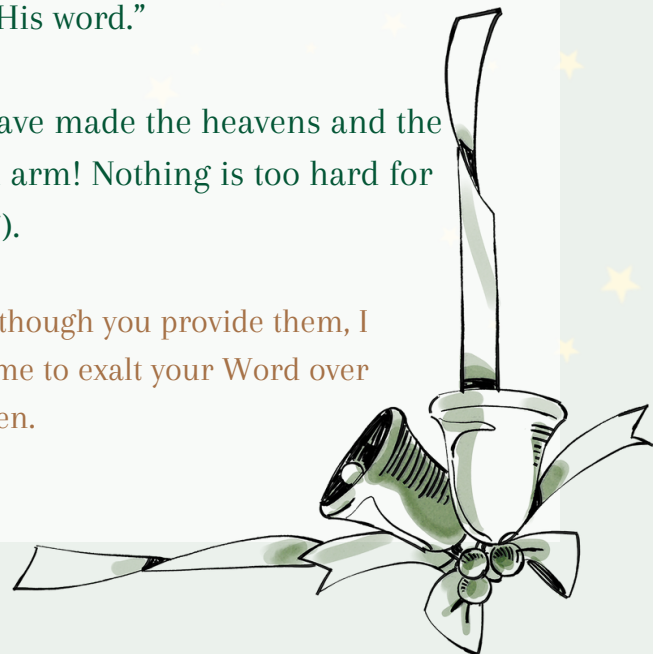
Romans 14:23b says, "For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." As North Campus Pastor Connor Bales often asks, "Ouch? or Amen?" I usually reply, "BOTH!"

As someone who has walked with the Lord for more than 50 years, I can attest to God's power, faithfulness, goodness, strength and more. Even so, I'm reluctant to confess that, for many years, I struggled with intense fear and anxiety. This led to cycles of guilt and shame, repentance, trust, and faith, then right back to fear and anxiety. This time, only "Ouch!"

The angel's news was a lot to take in and process. My response could easily have been similar to Zechariah's emphatic question. This is because I would have been looking through the lens of my limited perspective rather than God's omnipotence. American theologian R.C. Sproul states, "When God speaks, your only responsibility is to trust His word."

Our response must be this: "Ah, Lord God! You have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you" (Jeremiah 32:17).

Prayer: Admittedly I ask for your miracles, and though you provide them, I fall into unbelief. Lord, help my unbelief. Help me to exalt your Word over my circumstances. Amen.





Today's Reading: Luke 1:26-33

Bonus: Matthew 1; Isaiah 1:1; Micah 5:2; Isaiah 7:14; Isaiah 53; Zechariah 9:9

Wouldn't you love to sip coffee and have a deep conversation with Mary, one of the most prominent characters of the Advent season? What questions would you ask her? Would you seek parenting advice? Would you inquire how she handled the gossip and shame she faced?

I would love to know how it felt to love Jesus as her beloved firstborn son, while also loving Him as her Lord and Savior. What was it like when He looked into her eyes? How did she feel when He gave her a special hug and said, "I love you, Mom"? How did she navigate rearing a sinless child while warring with sin in your own life?

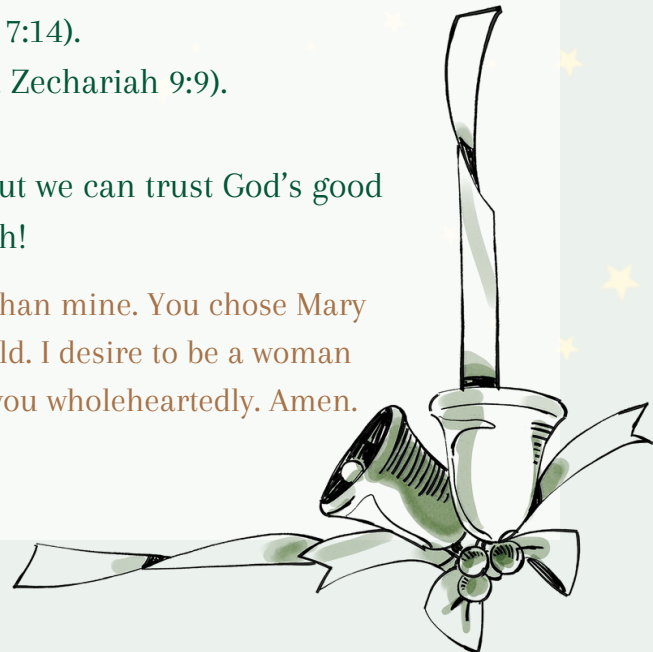
And that's not all...how does one prepare to take on the role of "mother" to Jesus, the Savior of the world? Better yet, what makes one qualified to carry out such a task?

Simply put, Mary was chosen because of God's grace and favor in her life. In order to fulfill Scripture, she did meet the necessary qualifications to fulfill Biblical prophecies:

1. She was of the lineage of David (Isaiah 11:1).
2. She was engaged to Joseph, who had to go to Bethlehem at just the right time (Micah 5:2).
3. She was a virgin (Isaiah 7:14).
4. She was from Nazareth (Isaiah 53, Zechariah 9:9).

Beyond that, we may never know exactly why, but we can trust God's good plan...and that's enough!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, your ways are higher than mine. You chose Mary to fulfill your plan to bring a Savior to the world. I desire to be a woman with whom you find favor, and I long to serve you wholeheartedly. Amen.





Today's Reading: Luke 1:34-38
Bonus: John 1:1-3, 14; Matthew 1:23; Genesis 1:1

Let's rewind a bit after jumping ahead to coffee with Mary.

As magnificent as Gabriel's first birth announcement was to Zechariah, his second one to Mary was next-level. Both were miraculous! However, we see a stark contrast between the two responses. Zechariah's question stemmed from unbelief, while Mary's question was rooted in faith; she just couldn't grasp how God's plan could be executed.

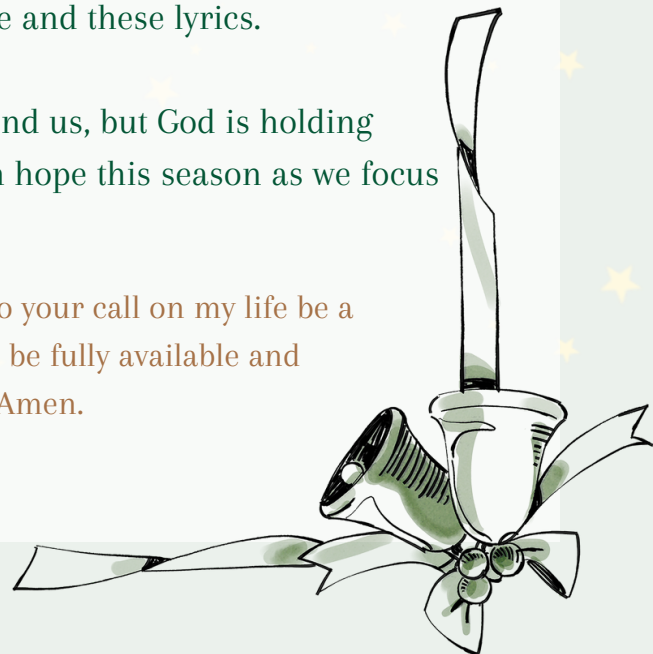
The exchange between Gabriel and Mary was epic because it introduced two great mysteries of our faith: the Incarnation and the Trinity. God the Father would bring the Son into the world through Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus would become fully man while remaining fully God.

Mary's heart was postured before the Lord without hesitation in total submission and surrender. She absolutely trusted God and didn't need to know the particulars. Mary simply yielded her heart to carry out the will of her Master, knowing that with God, nothing was impossible (v. 37).

One of the best songs I've heard (and sung) that emulates Mary's response (in verse 38) is called "Be Born in Me," written by Bernie Herms and Nichole Nordeman. Let's listen to it this week and let the cry of our heart in response to God's call on our lives echo this verse and these lyrics.

The world may seem to be falling apart around us, but God is holding everything together. May our hearts be filled with hope this season as we focus on Him.

Prayer: Lord, enable my immediate response to your call on my life be a resounding "Amen, let it be so!" I desire to be fully available and completely yielded to you. Amen.





Week 1


DIGGING DEEPER

LUKE 1:1-38

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Luke's written account of Godful sending the promised Savior is one of historical accuracy, including chronological and geographic order. According to Bible scholars David Guzik and Chuck Smith, because Luke said this information was collected from **eyewitnesses** to these events, it is safe to assume that he received the information for chapters one and two directly from Mary, the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:2). Thus, he got the information from his interview with Mary for these two chapters. Even still, we should never discount the Holy Spirit's inspiration to Luke by providing these facts in the Holy Scriptures. Amazingly, the detail present in Luke's account is not found in the other gospels.

Luke included specific narrative regarding the devout, faithful Levite priest, Zechariah, and his wife, Elizabeth, who miraculously became the parents of the first New Testament prophet, John the Baptist. Also, he provided the account of Mary's encounter with the angel who announced God's plan to bring his Son to earth. God's perfect timing for the advent of Christ is described only in chapter one of Luke's gospel with these facts:

- Zechariah's priestly division was called in this particular rotation from 24 divisions (some eighteen thousand priests) who served on the Temple grounds. Zechariah was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to tend to the burning of the incense altar (Luke 1: 8-9; 1 Chronicles 24). This was likely a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!
 - The process of God allowing the Israelites to cast lots to determine His will for a given situation was practiced many times throughout Israel's history.
 - God ordained this moment in time to reveal His message by using an appointed angel who would rekindle Zechariah's hope and reward his devotion. In their old age, he and Elizabeth would have a miracle baby!
 - Zechariah may have thought he only wanted a son, but God gave him a prophet whose name is forever linked with the story of Jesus Christ (Luke 1:76-77).
 - Luke 1:26-28, 31-33 states how God fulfilled the prophecy to Mary from Isaiah 7:14, who then humbly became the earthly virgin mother to the Son of God (Luke 1:38).
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HOPE

“For nothing will be impossible with God.”
Luke 1:37, ESV

These words spoken to Mary by the angel gave her hope. Finding out she would be the mother of Jesus must have been overwhelming, bringing fear and understandable questions. Although the message seemed hard to believe, hearing that nothing is impossible with God surely comforted her anxious heart, and so she trusted the Lord with her future.

In her book “Suffering Is Never for Nothing”, missionary and author Elisabeth Elliot wrote about how she learned to trust Jesus through her suffering. She stated, “Whatever is in the cup that God is offering me, whether it be pain and sorrow and suffering and grief along with the many more joys, I’m willing to take it because I trust Him.”

Where can the light of Jesus shine into a hopeless situation in your life? Advent is a season of hopeful expectation! You can rest in knowing that Jesus is Emmanuel and is with you in your circumstance. You are not alone. Rejoice!! The long-awaited Savior was born in Bethlehem, and He is our hope!

[“Come Thou Long Expected Jesus” - Shane
and Shane arrangement]