

Week 3

Immanuel: God with Us

This week, we contemplate the miracle of hope breaking through in the First Advent, as God miraculously worked in the lives of ordinary people like Mary, Joseph, Zechariah, and Elizabeth to enter into the world as Immanuel—God with us.

**YOU WILL CONCEIVE AND
GIVE BIRTH TO A SON, AND
YOU ARE TO CALL HIM JESUS.
HE WILL BE GREAT AND WILL
BE CALLED THE SON OF THE
MOST HIGH. . . . HIS KINGDOM
WILL NEVER END.**

Luke 1:31–33



BY RACHEL KANG

THIS IS THE GENEALOGY
OF JESUS THE MESSIAH
THE SON OF DAVID, THE
SON OF ABRAHAM.

During Advent, as we seek to encounter and worship Christ, we often look for him in the shining star that led the Magi to the miracle in the manger. We look for Christ in the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We look for him in the heavenly host of angels singing to shepherds watching o'er flocks by night.

We don't often think to look for Jesus in his genealogy. There we see the mention of great men like Abraham, the father of our faith, or King David, the warrior and worshiper. Yet the Messiah's genealogy highlights not only greatness but also grace. His lineage names not only leaders but also those least expected—unlikely like Tamar, a tainted woman; Ruth, a Moabite; and Rahab, a woman of the night.

A genealogy isn't just a list of names to skim and skip through. Genealogies are paragraphs of paradoxes that point to a God of the impossible. A God who had it in his mind for our Messiah to come from a bloodline of kingdoms and crowns as well as from criminals and castaways.

The genealogy of “Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham” not only invites us to ponder that God chose some of the unlikeliest of people, places, and plots to accomplish his plans for his people; it also provides us a record of promises and prophecies from the heart of a faithful God who fulfilled the very future he foretold. More than a mere summary filled with names, Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus reveals the fulfilled prophecy of a Messiah who’d “come up from the stump of Jesse” (Isa. 11:1) and the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that through him “all nations on earth will be blessed” and that his descendants would be “numerous as the stars in the sky” (Gen. 22:17-18).

So lean into this list of names. Let it lead you into holy living as we persevere in the time and space between Christ's birth and Christ's return. Let it remind you that we can trust in God's Word and in his promise to make good of our unlikely lives and, ultimately, to make good of this unlikely world. So linger long in the lineage of Christ, praising God for all that he has done, all the while waiting—with eager and expectant hope—for all that is to come.

12/14 HOLD ON

BY RICH VILLODAS

Luke 1:5–25

**BUT THE ANGEL SAID
TO HIM: “DO NOT BE
AFRAID, ZECHARIAH;
YOUR PRAYER HAS
BEEN HEARD. YOUR
WIFE ELIZABETH
WILL BEAR YOU A
SON, AND YOU ARE
TO CALL HIM JOHN.”**

Luke 1:13

In an instant society in which we can order something online and get it an hour later, we often have a hard time waiting. Yet, as Simone Weil said, “Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life.”

Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, had been waiting for a long time. “They were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old” (Luke 1:7). Zechariah means *he whom the Lord remembers*. There’s a painful irony here, for though his name means *the Lord remembers*, in all the long years of waiting, it likely felt as if the Lord had forgotten him.

But in Luke 1:5–25, everything changes. The angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and says, *You will have a son*. This news is so incredible, so shocking, that Zechariah’s response is *This is impossible*. It’s hard for Zechariah to believe it’s going to happen. And because he doesn’t believe, Zechariah gets a case of angelic laryngitis for the next nine months until his son is born.

Zechariah and Elizabeth’s story reminds us that a faithful response to waiting is prayer. Gabriel told Zechariah, “Your prayer has been heard” (v. 13). This statement gives us insight into how Zechariah and Elizabeth handled their long years of disappointment: They persevered in prayer. They prayed even when things did not unfold as they expected them to. They held on to God, even in the midst of social disgrace, disappointment, and hopelessness.

But, of course, their waiting was not perfect. Consider verse 20: “You *did not believe* my words, which *will come true* at their appointed time” (emphasis added). Even though Zechariah lacked faith, God still performs the miracle. Advent reminds us that even though our faith is not always strong, God is faithful to come. We may doubt, get depressed, become discouraged, or want to give up, yet God is still gracious to come.

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is both beautiful and frustrating. It’s beautiful because their long waiting ends with answered prayer. But it’s also frustrating because we know that not all of our prayers are answered in this same way. This is the complexity of Advent—human suffering and divine grace—and we hold it all together. Whether it is in this life or the life to come, we know God will make all things new. So with Zechariah and Elizabeth, we hold on.

This article is adapted from a sermon Rich Villodas preached on December 8, 2019. Used by permission.

REFLECT ON LUKE 1:5–25. In what ways might you relate to or empathize with Zechariah? What does this account reveal to you about God? About suffering? About waiting?

BY KEN SHIGEMATSU

**“I AM THE LORD’S
SERVANT,” MARY
ANSWERED. “MAY
YOUR WORD ME
BE FULFILLED.”**

Mary is incredibly famous today, but there was a time when she was completely unknown. She was just a teenage peasant girl from Nazareth, a town which some scholars say may have had fewer than 100 people. Like her peers, Mary was probably illiterate. Given her station in life, she would have been expected to marry humbly—a poor, working-class boy. Their family would likely often go hungry because there wasn't enough to make ends meet.

When the God of the universe decided to choose his mother, he didn't approach a young woman of wealth and status. Instead, God approached an illiterate peasant girl from a very small town. Jesus' genealogy (Matt. 1:1-17) shows us that we don't have to be of a particular race or be an "insider" to be part of God's story. And when we look at Mary, we see that we don't have to be rich, from a big city, highly educated, or important in society. We can be dirt ordinary and yet be part of this everlasting story.

What is the one qualification that God seems to require? When the angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her, *You're about to become the mother of God*, Mary opened up her heart and said, *Yes, may it be to me as you have said*. To become part of this story and to experience God birthing his life in us, all we need is a yes. We need to consent to the work of the Holy Spirit inside us.

Recently, I've been praying something called the Welcoming Prayer. I pray it like this: *Holy Spirit, I agree to your work in me and I let go of my desire for security, for affection and esteem, for power and control.* This was the essence of Mary's yes to God. She let go of security, affection and esteem, and power and control. As a result, her reputation would be stained for the rest of her life. She'd one day see her adult son mocked, spat upon, beaten, and nailed to a Roman cross. It would feel like a dagger piercing her heart (Luke 2:35). Yet she said *yes*.

May we, like Mary, pray, “Holy Spirit, I say yes to your work in me.” May God’s life be birthed in us. May we too play our part in the grand and everlasting story of God.

*This article is adapted from a sermon Ken Shigematsu preached on December 25, 2019.
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CONTEMPLATE LUKE 1:26–38. What might it look like for you to say yes like Mary? To consent to the work of the Spirit within you? Pray, welcoming God’s work in your life.

HOPE WHEN THE FUTURE CRUMBLES

Matthew 1:18-24

Matthew 1:20

They named Mary's boy Jesus, a common name, believing that he also bore another name—Immanuel—and believing that this scandalous birth story would be redeemed by divine scandal, "God with us." Joseph wagered his life, family, future, and identity on the chance that God was faithful—that this common boy, this source of so much initial disappointment and upheaval in Joseph's life, was indeed the hope of the world.

READ MATTHEW 1:18–24, prayerfully engaging your imagination to step into Joseph's story. What might he have thought or felt? What does he show us about faithfulness and hope?

A SONG OF MERCY AND JUSTICE

Luke 1:39–56

Luke 1:46, 50

PONDER LUKE 1:39–56. How does Mary's song emphasizing God's mercy and justice speak into your own life today? How does it offer hope to our hurting world?

12/18 THE LIGHT AND THE KING

BY JAY Y. KIM

Isaiah 9:2-7; 40:1-5
Luke 1:57-80; 3:1-6

AND YOU, MY CHILD,
WILL BE CALLED A
PROPHET OF THE MOST
HIGH; FOR YOU WILL
GO ON BEFORE THE
LORD TO PREPARE
THE WAY FOR HIM.

Luke 1:76

Zechariah and Elizabeth named their baby John, which means *God is gracious and has shown us favor*. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah prophesied over his son: “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, 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” (Luke 1:76-79).

When we fast-forward to John the Baptist’s adult life, we see he does exactly that. Luke records,

He went into all the country . . . preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God’s salvation.’” (3:3-6)

These ideas from Isaiah about reshaping valleys, hills, and roads to prepare the way were, in the ancient world, associated with the arrival of royalty. And, indeed, John’s ministry focused on this one thing: declaring that a king was on the way.

Zechariah’s prophecy over his newborn includes a paraphrase of another passage from Isaiah: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned” (9:2). The people who heard Zechariah prophesy these words would have known exactly what this Isaiah passage was about: the promise of a coming king. It’s part of the same familiar passage that declares, “For to us a child is born . . . He will reign on David’s throne” (vv. 6-7).

This offers such immense hope for us. As much as we may like to believe that we can create the peace and joy we desire through our own efforts, the story of John the Baptist and the words of Zechariah and Isaiah emphatically declare that the peace and joy every human longs for will not be realized until the king arrives. John the Baptist literally gave his life to proclaim this truth—to help people see that a light was about to break through the darkness.

*This article is adapted from a sermon Jay Y. Kim preached on December 9, 2018.
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CONSIDER LUKE 1:57-80 ALONGSIDE ISAIAH 9:2-7; 40:1-5; AND LUKE 3:1-6.

Which parts of Zechariah’s prophecy stand out to you? How do these passages convey the hope of Advent?

A GOD WE CAN TOUCH

Luke 2:1-7

Luke 2:1-2

REFLECT ON LUKE 2:1-7, considering the details Luke uses to situate this event in space and time. Why is this significant? What does it emphasize to you about God? About Advent?



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ADVENT: LIVING HOPE

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