

A virgin birth! What's the big deal?

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[0 : 01] Our scripture reading today comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 1, verses 26 to 56. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.

The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went with her and said, Greetings you who are highly favoured. The Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

But the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. 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.

The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end.

How will this be? Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin. The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come on you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

[1 : 16] So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. 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 fail. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May your word to me be fulfilled.

Then the angel left her. At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

In a loud voice she exclaimed, Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear. But why am I so favoured that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord will fulfil his promises to her.

[2 : 24] And Mary said, My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour. For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed. For the Mighty One has done great things for me. Holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arms. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things but sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever.

Just as he promised our ancestors. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. Amen.

[3 : 28] This is the reading of God's Word. Well, we're going to find out more about that passage and what it has to say to us today.

And I'm going to hand over now to David Meredith. And he's going to speak from this passage and help us to see what God might say to us personally through it. Hi, I'm David.

I'm one of the preaching team here at Cornerstone. And it's good to be with you again just to open up God's Word and see what God has to say to us. So this morning we're looking at Luke chapter 1. This is the second Sunday in Advent. Our big theme these last few weeks and the next few weeks will be hope and darkness. And hope is certainly a big issue just now.

I just had a quick trawl through the net to see what folk are saying about hope. And the big headline was that Trump's hopes for winning the election were dashed by COVID-19.

[4 : 27] There's another thing that says that the UK vaccination programme is looking good. And we are hopeful because the UK has got a great record in vaccination.

And so we come here to Luke chapter 1. Luke is a doctor and he's given an account of the life of Jesus Christ. And it's certainly a chapter of hope.

I don't know what your views on the Bible are, if you read the Bible much, but the Bible really is an electrifying book in many ways. There was a famous Bible translator called J.B. Phillips.

And he sort of translated the Bible into a more modern version from the old authorised version. And he used a very interesting phrase. He said that working through the Bible was like rewiring an old house while the current is still switched on.

Because there was just that sense of life. And you'd come to things that you just didn't realise were there. And you get a sense here, even in chapter 1, that this is a big chapter.

[5 : 37] There's tension. You read there, for example, in verse 27, God sent an angel. It's not every day the angels turn up. Verse 27, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph.

Again, the context was that a virgin, of course, just a different word for a young girl. So this is someone that you would not expect to be the hero in the story in any way.

On the power trajectory, young girls were really at the bottom of the rung. They had no power. And yet we see here a hint that something extraordinary and something amazing is going to happen.

So the angels turn up with a promise. And the promise is really quite astounding, that she's going to give birth to a son. And you're going to call him Jesus. And he will be great.

And he will be called the son of the Most High. So just think about that for a moment. This unknown peasant girl from Nazareth in the middle of nowhere is going to bear the son of God in a most extraordinary way.

[6 : 51] You cannot beat the Bible for a sense of drama. It's the tales of unexpected. You just don't know what's going to come next.

And so we have here the reality of the virgin birth. The virgin birth is not just a motif. The virgin birth is not just a kind of fable or a story.

It is the ultimate hope from that which is impossible. And so we see the bigger picture here of hope, don't we, that from a situation that seems to be medically, scientifically, biologically impossible, God takes from that a picture of hope.

And indeed, not just hope, but the greatest person to give hope ever, that is the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are, or were, 108 billion people born in the planet since its origins.

A bit of useless information, 7% of those are alive at the present time. So of that 108 billion people, there was only ever one virgin birth.

[8 : 04] Now folks say, well, you look at this story and it must have been told to gullible people. Do you think they didn't know the facts of life? Do you think that they didn't work out where babies came from?

Remember, Luke was written by a doctor. The New Testament characters were not fantastical, out-of-touch people. They were just ordinary folk.

Matthew was a tax collector. They were just ordinary folk, soldiers, carpenters, just folk like you and folk like me.

And so this morning, as we look at the passage, and if you've got your Bible in front of you or your phone app open, as we look at Luke 1, verses 26 onwards, I just really want to ask two questions. Question number one is, did it happen? Is this account here credible? And secondly, does it matter?

[9 : 07] Well, first of all, then, we ask the question, well, did it happen? If you look at the beginning of Luke, it's quite interesting. Luke says, with this in mind, Luke chapter 1, verse 3, with this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things that you have been taught.

So we see that the purpose of writing Luke's gospel is that so this guy called Theophilus and generations to come will know the certainty of the things that were written.

The Bible is not like Aesop's fairy tales. It doesn't begin once upon a time. It begins with dates. It begins with places. It begins with people.

All of these things are verifiable. And indeed, Luke, certainly from hints we get in verse 19 and verse 51, where we read it, Mary pondered all these things in her heart.

Luke had spoken to Mary. He had interviewed Mary about this situation. What's the point of this? The point is that Christianity is a historic faith.

[10:28] It's based on a timeline. It's based on a context. And it's based on facts. It's not a philosophy that makes us feel good.

It's not a metaphor. It's not one of the kind of Mithra and Dionysian cults that were standard at the time of the New Testament.

And take this also, we're asking the question, you know, did it happen? Look at the broader context. Luke here is trying to convince a particular group of people of the reality of the truth of these things. What's the word? The certainty of the things that you've been taught. And so he's trying to persuade a group largely of conservative, Orthodox Jewish people.

If you were going to convince a group of people, you would not start with a story of an unmarried girl who has a baby.

[11:32] That would have been shocking to the original audience. And so that curved ball, that, you know, revealing of something that the early readers would have been not only shocked by, but frankly, but frankly, offended by, shows that Luke is not, you know, hiding it.

He's not making stuff up here. He is telling it as it is. So the fact that there was no human father here, provoked outrage.

It provoked outrage then. And it even provoked cynicism and outrage. Now, did it happen? We're talking here about a virgin birth, a birth without the normal biological process.

And remember, you know, here at Cornerstone, we often, you know, say the creed. And in that creed, we state specifically that Jesus was born of a virgin.

Is it important? There's a reasonably well-known Scottish theologian called Donald MacLeod. And he wrote this. He said that the virgin birth is posted on guard at the door of the mystery of Christmas.

[12:50] And none of us must think of hurrying past it. It stands at the threshold of the New Testament, blatantly supernatural, defying rationalism.

Inform us that all that follows is following the same order. And if we find it offensive, there's no point proceeding any further.

And so at the threshold of Christmas, at the doorpost of the whole New Testament, there is a blatant supernatural act.

And as MacLeod says, you'd better start getting used to that. If you read the New Testament, if you engage with Christianity, because it's a supernatural situation.

And remember, most people's faith journey does not end at the virgin birth. They move on. Did it happen? Absolutely. And it happened because we have a supernatural God.

[13:54] And even perhaps this morning, as you sit in our house, there's something supernatural going on. The fact that, you know, you are here, that we're all together.

This is not random. This is part of a purpose. And so what we're seeing here at the very outset that gives us hope is this idea of the virgin birth.

So we've asked then, did it happen? I guess the second question is, does it matter? There are some things in Christianity, some things in the world of church that don't really matter all that much. whether the preacher wears robes, whether he makes, wears a cord tie, whether he wears a Hawaiian shirt. It's really not of the first importance.

Christians disagree about baptism. Should we baptise adults? Should we baptise babies? Well, yeah, it's important in its own way, but it's of a different order to this.

[14:56] Does it matter? Absolutely. And we're about to see how. You'll notice in Luke chapter one, there's two miraculous conceptions.

There is the better known one here, obviously of the virgin birth through Mary. But from verse 39 onwards, there's a second one, Mary's cousin, also had a supernatural intervention.

And she gave birth to John the Baptist. Supernatural in a different way, obviously to the virgin birth here, but certainly we find here that God is involved in this situation.

And so this is a wonderful story. Gabriel enters. This angel appears to the virgin Mary, and he tells her a story.

And this happens in a nowhere place in the middle of nowhere. That's a point right away, that there are no nowhere places.

[16:00] There is nowhere that is unimportant. You think of various places in Scotland that nobody gives a second thought to.

Nobody gives a second thought to, you know, Cambusland. Nobody gives a second thought, apart from Neil Macmillan, to Kirkcaldy. Nobody gives a second thought to, I don't know, Port Seton or somewhere like that.

They're not big places. And yet it's to a simple girl and an ordinary place that God reveals something amazing. No ordinary people.

No ordinary places. But you read here, you know, this angel comes with a message, and it's a message of great. Verse 28, you're highly favoured.

The same word is used in Ephesians 1.6 to speak about the free bestowal of God's grace. So God shows grace, God shows favour.

[17:01] But notice that the reaction, the reaction was verse 29, Mary was greatly troubled at his words. Now, I think that's significant also, that God's grace can be unsettling.

Even God's good things, God's challenge to us, isn't always kind of sweetness and light. It can be unnerving. It can be unsettling.

It can even take us to the very edge of trouble. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

Sometimes we wonder about blessings. Remember, Churchill, of course, Churchill famously brought Britain through the Second World War and was dramatically dropped by the British public. He lost the election subsequent to the Second World War. And his wife, Clementine, said to him, you know, Winston, it may be a blessing in disguise.

[18:07] And he famously said, some blessings, some disguise. Sometimes it takes a while to work out the blessings of God because they don't initially appear to be all that wonderful and great blessings.

And so to Mary, she was taken aback here about being the chosen one. But what Gabriel tells us here unpacks our second question.

Why does it matter? So let's follow what Gabriel is saying here. And we know there's one or two reasons why it matters. Try it with me here.

Look at verse 31. And you notice first of all there, his name, you will conceive and give birth to a son and you are to call him Jesus.

Now, the name Jesus is so well known. It's part of our culture. Even non-believers know the name Jesus. And the name Jesus means, you know, it's Yeshua.

[19:13] It means God saves. And so that's why it matters because Jesus is primarily a savior.

He is an example. Sure. He's a great example. He's an example of steadfastness. He's an example of kindness to the poor.

He's an example of wisdom. He's a teacher. He's a philosopher. He's the greatest teacher ever.

He's the greatest philosopher who ever lived. There's no doubt about that.

But primarily he is a savior. And it's in his role as savior that folk find the most challenging.

And in this time in which we live, where we need hope, it is Jesus as savior that we need most. And this brings us to the heart of the human condition.

[20:15] What is the secular trinity? Someone said that the secular trinity is politics, entertainment, and education.

These are the things we look at. Certainly in the Western world, in the majority world, there would be different priorities. But in the Western world, we look for politics to save us.

Politics is big just now. It's the talk of the steamy. Folk are debating all the time. You know, folk are looking for political solutions. Entertainment.

You know, folk are really enjoying the various glamorous entertainment things that go on.

Education. Folks say, well, cleverness, inventiveness will take us out of all sorts of problems.

But, yeah, there is the secular trinity. But behind the secular trinity, it does not address the main need of the human condition.

[21:17] So Gabriel comes and says, your son is going to be called Jesus. Jesus means God saves. Mary ought not to be afraid because this child will be our saviour.

Saviour. That word is not uncommon today. Again, I was trawling through the newspapers and I was looking for a contemporary use of the word saviour.

And I came up with one. Dolly Parton. Yes, Dolly. Oh, 95. Dolly Parton has given \$1 million to Vanderbilt University of Nashville.

And, of course, Vanderbilt partnered with Moderna that has developed the Caverna 19 vaccine. So, in the US, Dolly is being portrayed as the COVID-19 saviour.

Now, Dolly Parton has done great works in literacy in Tennessee, for example. Phenomenal work there. She's generous. She's given a million pounds to Vanderbilt.

[22 : 30] The COVID-19 saviour. But behind all that, There is a saviour. We're looking for a messiah. We've got the, What some philosophers call the Gandalf complex.

Looking for a wise figure. Looking for someone to take us through this situation. In Jesus, In Jesus, We have that figure. In Jesus, We have the Messiah.

We cannot over claim what Jesus claims to be. And Gabriel comes to her. Why does it matter? Because you are going to give birth to the saviour.

So, That's the first thing we notice. That's why it matters. Because of his name. He is the saviour. The second thing why it matters is in verse 32. We see his name.

Secondly, We see his greatness. He will be great. These simple words. He will be great.

[23 : 29] Now, We often overuse words. But, Jesus is great. It's a big word.

He's great. Because of his life. He's great because of his death. He's great because of his resurrection. And his ascension.

The Bible claims. Really quite extraordinary things for Jesus. There's a verse in Colossians that says that Jesus is the heir of all things.

And one writer said to us, As Christians, He says, Don't be ashamed of Jesus. He says, If you're ashamed of Jesus, It's like a candle. Being ashamed of the sun.

No claim can be too big for Jesus. There is no one greater. What excites you. What excites you? He made it.

[24 : 31] What makes you wonder? He's behind it. What idea stimulates you and think, Wow, That is out of this world. He conceived it.

He is the heir of all things. He is behind all things. He will be great. The great one. We've seen his name.

We've seen his greatness. Thirdly, notice his status. Look at verse 32 there. He will be called the son of the most high.

And saw that developing human fetus within Mary, In nature, Being, Essence, Function, Is God. The fullness of God Is found in Jesus. It's Christmas. What's it all about? I love the Christmas carols.

[25 : 34] And kind of one of my favourite ones Is the one that is a question. Who is he in yonder stall? At whose feet the shepherds fall.

Tis the Lord, O wondrous story. Tis the Lord, The King of glory. At his feet we humbly fall. Crown him, Crown him, Lord of all.

The God who made the universe Is contracted to be this fetus. That's his status. He is God. He is worthy of adoration. He is worthy of worship. That's why the wise men, That's why the shepherds, Spontaneously, Without any prompting whatsoever, Just fell at his feet And worshipped him.

But then we notice something else here. We notice, fourthly, His background. Verse 32. He will be great. He will be called the son of the most high. The Lord God will give him the throne Of his father, David.

[26 : 44] David. Now, again, From a Jewish perspective, There was looking after the, Looking for the Messiah, The long-awaited one. The one who would be the ultimate David.

King David was the greatest of all the Israelite kings. It was under King David's reign That the expansion of Israel was at its optimum.

He reigned with wisdom. He was someone who really made Israel great again. When have we heard that expression, Let's make Israel great again.

But here we see, It is not in a self-centered, Narcissistic politician. It is not in someone who cannot think beyond himself, But he will be the son of the most high.

He will have the throne of his father, David. The good king who would replace all the bad kings. The fulfillment of promise.

[27 : 43] The story of the Bible. That is his background. That is who he is. But then notice in verse 33, His permanence.

And he will reign over Jacob's descendants. That's us, Jacob's descendants. Not just the Jewish people, but all people. He will reign over them.

His kingdom will never end. All political lives end in failure.

I think it was Enoch Powell said that. All empires end in failure. Alexander the Great was great. He wasn't Alexander the Quite Good. He was Alexander the Great. And yet his empire crashed. The Roman Empire, Well, we see traces of it in Hadrian's walls.

[28 : 43] And one or two long roads that can be seen from helicopters from a great height. We can see the ruins of the Roman Empire. Even go to Rome and see the Colosseum in all its wonder.

And yet it's a ruin. Empires are ultimately empires of dust. But the kingdom of God will never fail. Even the great empires of the West just now, the USA, will one day fall. It will crash. Communism crashed. They all end up the same way.

But this empire will last forever and ever and ever. And it's a kingdom which is in progress now and which will continue right on to the end of time and right beyond the end of time.

Now, notice verse 34. Mary doesn't mock this. How will this be since I am a virgin? This is beyond her.

[29 : 54] It's literally inconceivable. This is impossible. But that's central in our faith.

The impossible becomes possible. That which is beyond human computation is made real. It is not that faith and the things of God are anti-science.

They are beyond science. God takes them to a new level. How this happens, the mechanics are unknown. Verse 35 is delicately put.

The Holy Spirit will come on you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Up until this time, no one, no thing. Nothing had ever been conceived according to this pattern.

But God bypassed the normal. The whole soiled and weary universe quivered at this injection of essential life.

[31 : 04] This was new. This was new. This was direct. Uncontaminated. It wasn't drained through all the crowded history of nature.

This was an outside intervention. Because mankind could not save himself. We've seen great, great people. You read about Mandela.

You read about Mother Teresa. You read about people who do just selfless things. But they're all flawed. Intervention had to come from outside.

That's how it had to be. A virgin birth. It had to come, as it were, from another realm. From heaven itself.

Because this universe was tainted. And it matters. Now, how does it matter? Let's conclude this.

[32 : 06] And let's put our cards on the table. How does a virgin birth matter? Well, if it's untrue, we have, according to the terms of the New Testament, an immoral woman gives birth to a liar.

If it's untrue, Jesus is a con artist who's not to be trusted. The integrity of the whole gospel, the integrity of this book, the integrity of Jesus is in question if the virgin birth is not true.

It's at, as McLeod says, the very gatepost of our faith and of history. And it matters because it establishes the identity of Jesus.

Larry King, the CNN talk show host, who's now, I think, retired, he was asked who he would want to interview.

Of all the characters of history, and he said, without question, it would be Jesus Christ. And the interviewer asked King, what would you ask him?

[33 : 23] And King said, I would ask him if he was indeed virgin born. The answer to that would define history for me.

I wonder, does it define history for you? Are you asking the question and the questions behind the questions, who is this Jesus who is our obsession?

Who is this Jesus who is the light of the world and the one who gives hope in this dark world? If it were two human parents, he would be just like us.

But the virgin birth gives us this unique combination of God and man, deity and humanity in one person. Now notice Mary's response, verse 38, I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered, may your word to me be fulfilled.

Her only part was to say yes to God. And really that defines faith. Faith is not about doing more.

[34 : 32] Faith is simply saying yes to God. That's the mistake of religion. The mistake of religion is doing more. Faith, however, is saying yes to God.

Folks, there's hope today. Holy child of Bethlehem, descend in us, we pray, cast out our sins and enter in, be born to us this day.

We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell, O come to us, abide with us, O Lord, Emmanuel.

Gandalf has not come. A greater than one, he has come. Jesus, who has given us hope. Folks, may you enjoy hope today in this second Sunday of Advent.

May you enjoy hope for the rest of your life. Thank you.