

# *Who brings a Christmas heart?*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

December 20, 2009

©2009 Scott L. Engle

*Luke 1:39-56 (NRSV)*

<sup>39</sup>In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,  
<sup>40</sup>where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit  
<sup>42</sup>and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?  
<sup>44</sup>For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.  
<sup>45</sup>And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

<sup>46</sup>And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

<sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup>for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

<sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup>His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup>He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

<sup>52</sup>He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

<sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

<sup>54</sup>He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

<sup>55</sup>according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

<sup>56</sup>And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

*This Advent sermon series has been about new hearts, Christmas hearts. But who brings these hearts to us? Is it through the mighty, the strong, and the influential? Or through the small, the humble, the inconsequential . . . the ordinary?*

The heart that is two sizes too small grows three sizes in a single morning, Christmas morning. That's the Grinch's story. He had set out to steal Christmas by swiping all the *Who*-presents . . . their ribbons, their wrappings, their tags, and their trappings. He was sure there'd be much weeping and moaning, but he heard only singing, not sniffing and groaning. Yes, "Every *Who* down in *Who*-ville, the tall and the small, was singing! Without any presents at all! He hadn't stopped Christmas from coming! It came! Somehow or other, it came just the same! . . . Maybe Christmas, he thought didn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more."

Transformation, redemption, salvation . . . all from a bunch of tiny, inconsequential, seemingly powerless *Whos*. Even Cindy-Lou *Who*, who was not more than two, had her part to play in the Grinch's breakthrough. Such is God's way.

*The God of the ordinary*

The way of Advent and of Christmas is the way of the inconsequential, the poor, the humble – the ordinary. It is not the way of the powerful, influential, and extraordinary. Look at the key figures in the drama.

As we saw two weeks ago, Luke opens his gospel with the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. They are an old couple without any children, which is a deep sorrow for

### Bethlehem's story

For a place that is well-known worldwide, Bethlehem was very unremarkable for much of its history. Located about 5 miles south of Jerusalem on the watershed that separates fertile Israel from the Judean desert, the town's name means "house of bread." Like Jerusalem, Bethlehem sits about 2,500 feet above sea level.

Before the time of Israel's kings, Bethlehem was the home of the Levite who acted as a priest for a man named Micah (not the prophet by the same name) (see Judges 17:7-13). Bethlehem was also the home of the concubine who is murdered in a story reminiscent of Sodom and Gomorrah, triggering a massacre at Gibeah (Judges 19-20). Bethlehem also played a prominent place in the story of Ruth, as it was the home of Boaz and the place Ruth and Naomi would settle.

But Bethlehem becomes a town of lasting significance in the story of David, for it was the home of David's family (1 Samuel 16:4; 17:12) and the place where, about 1000 years before Jesus, Samuel anoints David as king of the united Israel and successor to Saul. Thus, when God promises David that a king from his family will always sit on the throne of Israel (2 Samuel 7), Bethlehem becomes the ancestral home of Israel's rightful monarchs.

them. Though he is a priest, he is one of thousands. Zechariah is not a man of any influence or notice. The high point of his priestly career is the one day that he is to go into the temple to make an incense offering. You can be sure that Israel's high priest has never heard of him. Yet it is to Zechariah that the angel Gabriel appears, telling him that his wife would bear a child, to be named John, who would "make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

And when Elizabeth was six months pregnant, her relative, Mary, was also visited by the angel Gabriel. At the time, Mary was engaged to a man named Joseph. Mary would probably have been 14 or so at the time. Her engagement to Joseph would have been completely binding, so much so that had Joseph died before their marriage, Mary would have been considered a widow!

Gabriel tells Mary that she is favored by God – and, of course, Mary is also a "nobody," from an out-of-the-way little village in the hill country of Galilee. As I'd guess most of us would be, Mary is perplexed and disquieted, probably even fearful. But she becomes reflective as she considers what the angel's greeting might mean for her. But Gabriel comforts her and then tells her something that makes no sense whatsoever to her! Mary is going to bear a child, and not just any child, but the "Son of the Most High" who will sit on David's throne! Mary's reflections turn to the immediate question of how this could possibly be. She is a virgin! Gabriel tells her that the baby will be born by the power of God.

Gabriel then tells Mary that her relative, Elizabeth, is pregnant, even though Elizabeth was very old and had been unable to bear children. Finally, Gabriel reminds Mary that "nothing will be impossible with God." Alan Culpepper, in his commentary on Luke, draws our attention to the fact that Gabriel's reminder is in the future tense. It echoes Jesus' later declaration, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Luke 18:27). A barren woman can have a child. A virgin can conceive. God can come to earth as a child. A person can be resurrected.

All of these are incredible claims, but with God, the impossible becomes possible. *And these seemingly impossible acts of God happen to and through the most ordinary of people.* Mary was just a young woman in a small, insignificant town, in an out-of-the-way Roman province, yet she is the one blessed among all women. Gabriel didn't visit a queen or a princess; instead, it is the obedient, worshipful response of this pious girl

that enables God's story to move forward. We celebrate Advent and Christmas each year because ordinary people like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph obeyed God.

Each of these ordinary people point us to the miracle of the incarnation, that the Lord God Almighty embraced the ordinariness of human flesh so that we might get new hearts. A baby born in a manger to a couple of "nobodies." This is God's way. This is Mary's song, known as the "Magnificat." The powerful are brought low and the weak are lifted up. God's way is the way of Mary, not of Herod. Of Joseph, not of Caesar. It sounded bizarre then and, truth be told, it sounds bizarre now if we will listen well.

*It is not the mighty who save us, it is the baby. Alleluia.*

### The Magnificat

Mary's song in verses 46 to 55 is often referred to as the "Magnificat," after the first word in the early Latin translation of the Bible (the "Vulgate"<sup>1</sup>). In the Vulgate, the opening of the song is "Magnificat anima mea, Dominum", or, "My soul doth magnify the Lord." As you can see for yourself, the NRSV preserves the word "magnify" in its translation of the couplet that opens the song. Other translations use words like "proclaims . . . exalts . . . praises . . . glorifies." Mary knows that this is magnificent!

Over the centuries, Mary's Magnificat has been set to music by many, but certainly the most well-known piece is Johann Sebastian Bach's choral masterpiece, the *Magnificat*. One of the few times that he used a Latin text, Bach's *Magnificat* debuted on Christmas Day, 1723, at the Church of St. Nicholas (really!) in Leipzig, Germany.

1. In about 400 AD, a Christian Bishop, Jerome, translated portions of the Bible into Latin. His work and that of others developed into the standard Latin version of the Bible, known as the Vulgate. This Latin Bible was the dominant Bible for centuries. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church designated the Vulgate as their only official Bible. It may surprise you to learn that it was called the Vulgate because in 400AD Latin was the common or "vulgar" language!

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. "Wealth is power, greed is good, a gun is strength . . . forgiveness is power, compassion is good, kindness is strength." Herod and Jesus had very different ideas about the nature and use of power. Make a Top Ten List of the contrasts in these two men. What does this list reveal about how we might be contrasted with Jesus? D.A. Hare writes this on the contrast between the king and the baby: "For us, the contrast can serve to symbolize the internal contrast between that part of the inner self which willingly and joyfully accepts the Lordship of Christ our King and that darker side of the self which firmly and persistently rejects his right to rule. Scoff not at Herod until you have acknowledged the Herod in yourself!" Your thoughts?
2. Can you even imagine the sheer joy that must have been running through Elizabeth and Mary? Luke's Gospel is filled with such stories of joy. What are some joyful stories of your own life? What have been the most joy-filled times in your life? I remember that when my first son was born I felt like I was electrified . . . though, in truth, I don't know that I can really describe my feelings. Perhaps it was one of those out-of-the-body experiences. I simply remember being joyful in every part of my being. Perhaps that is what it was like for Elizabeth and Mary. Discuss what these joyful experiences have in common. Babies are born every day; it is quite ordinary. How does this "ordinariness" point us toward God, especially God as Savior and Redeemer? What does the power of these experiences reveal to us about God?

# Encounter

*a time for fellowship, worship, and learning*  
**every Wednesday evening at 6:45 in Wesley Hall**

## ***Christmas According to the Bible***

**This Wednesday (Dec 23): Luke 2:1-20**

It 's the eve of Christmas Eve. Given our often grandiose celebrations of Christmas, a story built upon humbleness seems almost out of place. Perhaps that is the very point. Kneel with the shepherds as they hear the most amazing news, spoken by the lips of angels. Join us as we take a close look at the traditional Christmas Eve passage: Luke 2:1-10.

**Coming to Encounter in January:**

***Song of Solomon: The truth about love, marriage, and sex***  
begins Wednesday, January 13

**Coming to Scott's 11:00 Sunday class in January**

***The Seven Faith Tribes: Religion in America, 2010***  
***Who They Are, What They Believe, and Why They Matter***  
begins Sunday, January 10

## ***Daily Bible Readings***

These are all lectionary readings during Advent. You might read each one and then ask yourself why, in particular, it is suggested to be read in preparation for Christmas.

<b>Monday, 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16</b> David's family is from Bethlehem, an insignificant little town about 5 miles south of Jerusalem (see 1 Samuel 16). Here God makes a promise to David that God's king will always come from David's family. What does this have to do with Jesus?	<b>Tuesday, Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19</b> This is a plea to God for salvation. From what do you need saving?
<b>Wednesday, Romans 16:25-27</b> In Paul's closing doxology of this letter, he speaks of a mystery that has been disclosed. What do you think that mystery is? You might also look at Romans 1:17-18 and 3:22.	<b>Thursday, Hebrews 10:5-10</b> Like much of Hebrews, this passage is a mystery to many Christians. What do you think is the main point here? How could we become better readers of the book of Hebrews?
<b>Friday, Isaiah 35:1-10</b> What joy at being brought home from exile, being led out of the darkness and into the light!	<b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b>