

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Part 1: Wondering | Luke 1:26-38

Rev. Andrew Jun

[SERMON MANUSCRIPT]

Scripture Reading

Please turn to Luke 1:26-38 in your Bibles and I'll read it. This is God's Word from...

Luke 1:26-38 (ESV): *26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" 29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. 30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. 36 And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.*

Amen!

Introduction

We most recently finished the books of Ezra and Nehemiah in our Sunday Celebrations. Now we're starting our Advent sermon series. Advent is the season of preparation before Christmas. Today's sermon is titled "Wondering" and it is from Luke 1:26-38.

The word "wonder" is a pretty common, cliché word, but I think that it's helpful to revisit its definition to understand what we mean. Here's what I found when I Googled it: wonder is "a feeling of *surprise* mingled with *admiration*, caused by something *beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar, or unexplainable*."

And although thoughts and feelings about Christmas have *also* become pretty common and cliché, I think "wonder" is a great word to describe the birth of Jesus into the world: this news should give us a feeling of surprise mingled with admiration because it is beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar, and even unexplainable. I hope to give us fresh eyes to see the wonder of Christmas from this Scripture.

This is what Advent is all about! It is the time to prepare our hearts to celebrate Christmas, the holiday that marks the birth of Jesus Christ into the world! All of creation- and especially God's people- groans at the weight of sin and waits for a greater hope.

In light of all the difficulties that the world has faced throughout the pandemic, I think that the words of this well-known Christmas hymn are so relatable: "O come, O come, Emmanuel / and ransom captive Israel / that mourns in lonely exile here / until the Son of God appear / Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel / shall come to thee, O Israel."

Christmas is the joyful news that God *is with us* and that *he will rescue* his people! Throughout this Advent season, we'll unpack the ways we can prepare for Christmas by meditating on how different characters anticipated the birth of Jesus from the Christmas narratives in the Gospel of Luke. Today we'll focus on "wonder" from Luke 1:26-38.

Proposition

Here is the "one thing" from this passage of Scripture that we read:

Have wonder-filled faith in God's news of Jesus' birth!

Organizational Statement

I have four main points in this sermon: first, God's presence (from verses 26-29); second, God's promised King (from verses 30-34); third, God's perfect Son (from verses 35-37); and (finally) fourth, God's people believe (from verse 38). I'll share four *wonderful* truths about Jesus Christ with each of my four main points.

Transition: For the first main point let's...

Sermon Outline

I. See verses 26-29: God's Presence.

- A. [Here's the first truth as we think about these verses...] **Truth #1:** Jesus is God's wonderful presence with us, his grace given to us as a gift (26-29).
1. In these verses, the angel Gabriel declared that God had chosen Mary and that God was present with Mary, all by his grace.
 - a) This is exciting stuff! Gabriel the angel was already part of the beginning of Luke's gospel; in Luke 1:5-25, he visited Zechariah the priest and announced that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son after a long time of infertility. This son would be John the Baptist, the one who would "prepare the way" for the coming of God's chosen king. And now there's even more exciting news that the angel delivered to Mary.
 - b) There are few things that are revealed about Mary here. She lived in a city called Nazareth in the region of Galilee (the region of Galilee is circled; Nazareth is pointed out). So this was way north of Jerusalem and in the outskirts of Israel- it was the remote, quiet countryside where no one special was expected to come from and nothing special usually happened. There's nothing special about Mary's hometown.
 - c) Mary is also described here in verse 27 as a virgin. Just to explain things in a really straightforward way, this meant that she was a young woman who had never slept with a man. She was "betrothed" to a man named Joseph. You see, back in those days, marriage was a two-step process: the first step was "betrothal," which meant that there was a formal agreement to marry

and a payment of the bridal price; the second step was “consummation,” which meant that the husband took his wife home to live together. A husband and wife only slept together in the consummation step. So Mary was betrothed to Joseph and they had not consummated their marriage yet. She had not yet slept with Joseph.

- d) Joseph is a passive character here, which is different than in Matthew’s gospel in which he’s more prominent. Here in Luke’s gospel, it’s just mentioned that Joseph was a descendant of David, the greatest king of Israel who reigned during the “golden era” of their history. But by this time, about one thousand years later, Joseph’s family was not royalty at all. He was just a pretty normal guy living in Galilee and getting ready to be wed to Mary.
- e) My point here that I want to make is that there was *nothing special about Mary*: she was a regular human being who- like all of us- was a sinner and fell short of God’s glory (Romans 3:23). When Gabriel the angel came to Mary, his message was very “wonderful”- it was an unexpected surprise. An angel of the Lord came to *her*- a *no one special* in the middle of *nowhere special*- and told her that *she was favored* by God. This word “favored” is the same exact word as “grace”: God was giving his divine grace to her! And the angel of the Lord told her that God himself was *with* her! This was the fulfillment of God’s promise from Isaiah the prophet:
 - o Isaiah 7:14 (ESV): *14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*
- f) “Immanuel” is Hebrew and it literally means, “God is with us.” God was not just in the temple in the important city of Jerusalem where the leaders of their day lived; God was with this common young lady Mary in this common place! This is part of the wonder of Christmas! From verses 26-29, we see the prelude to *Wonderful Truth #1: Jesus is God’s wonderful presence with us, his grace given to us as a gift.* For us, this might sound like old news, but for Mary this was absolutely brand new, wonderful news! That’s why the text says that she was “greatly troubled” and “tried to discern” what in the world was going on. Her feelings totally make sense because this was totally *unexpected* and *unfamiliar* to her!
- g) But not just to her, but this would have been a *surprise* to all of Israel. You see, this was called the “intertestamental period,” or the time between the two testaments. Remember last week we said that the end of Nehemiah was a “cliffhanger” because it was the last book in the Old Testament in terms of historical timeline. After Nehemiah, there was four-hundred years of silence- no prophets, no messages from God- and Israel waited impatiently for God to do something. And *now* God announced personally to Mary that he was going to pour out his grace and give the world his literal presence- God in flesh and bones into the world!

Transition: So far we’ve heard about God’s presence. Now for the second main point let’s...

II. See verses 30-34: God's Promised King.

- A. [Here's the second truth as we think about these verses...] **Truth #2:** Jesus is God's wonderful King that he promised to us in the Scriptures (30-34).
1. In these verses, the angel Gabriel declared that Mary would give birth to Jesus, the "Son of the Most High" and his promised King.
 - a) There is a lot of information packed here in these verses. Gabriel the angel elaborated on his message to Mary: Gabriel announced that the baby that would be in her womb already had a name chosen by God for him- the baby's name was "Jesus." "Jesus" is actually "Yeshua" in Hebrew and it means "YHWH (which is the personal name of God as revealed in the Old Testament) saves." In Matthew 1:21, it explained that this name pointed to the truth that Jesus would save his people from their sins. But there's more to this so let's continue the idea of *why* the identity of this baby was so surprising for Mary. Jesus would not be a *common* dude- Gabriel's exact words were that he would be "great"!
 - b) Gabriel said specifically that Jesus would be given the throne of David. This is really *wonderful* because this is what God promised to David himself and to the rest of Israel throughout the Scriptures. It's recorded in 2 Samuel 7:12-13: God promised that when David died, he would raise up a new king who would come from David's family line. If you have ever heard of the terms "Messiah" or "Christ," these are the Hebrew and Greek words for "king," and they refer to the king that God promised to David. This king would build God's house and would be king forever!
 - c) And Gabriel said that this promised king wouldn't just be a "son of David" but the "Son of the Most High." Throughout the Old Testament, the title "Most High" refers to God- God who is revealed in the Bible as, literally, no one else higher! And the promised King, Jesus, would be the Son of the Most High! Let's think about this a bit more. Kings came and went and led the people of God into all kinds of idolatry, immorality, and corruption; all of their earthly kings from Saul, David, Solomon...and then all the other lesser kings that came afterwards- ultimately *failed their people*.
 - d) Eventually, they were conquered, their city and temple were destroyed, and they were taken into exile. Like we studied before in Ezra-Nehemiah, the Jews experienced a bit of a revival, but even then, they still *felt* their need for a greater king; they cried out to God in confession of their sins because they were still *slaves*- they had been waiting for four hundred years and in that long passing of time, they were subject to the Persians, the Greeks, and then the Romans. But now God promised that his own Son would be their perfect, promised King!
 - e) But here's where it got really confusing for Mary and for any recipient of this Gospel. Mary asked this question in verse 34: "*How will this be, since I am a virgin?*" Mary would be *pregnant*! Don't forget how much of a surprise this was for her! She was betrothed to Joseph but she hadn't slept with him yet, or any other man for that matter. You know, even back then in ancient times, they knew how these things worked! This seemed pretty crazy! But now she was being told that she would be pregnant with this baby named Jesus who would be God's Son, the eternal King! This is truly "wonderful" because it was something beautiful that the people of Israel were eagerly waiting for, and it was at the same time surprising because

this King would be conceived and born through *Mary* in this way! From verses 30-34, we see *Wonderful Truth #2: Jesus is God's wonderful King that he promised to us in the Scriptures.*

- f) Mary, as well as the anyone reading this gospel, would have thought that the king would liberate them from their earthly oppressors. But Mary and the rest didn't understand it at the time, but this king was going to turn the idea of a "kingdom" upside down! This would be a running theme in the rest of the Gospel of Luke- from Jesus' teaching, ministry, death, and resurrection. Even from the beginning, we get hints that it would be different than what we'd normally expect about a "kingdom": Mary and Joseph were nobody special or unique. The king wouldn't be born and raised with privilege as royalty. He would come as a pretty common, blue-collar person.
- g) In this way, *we all* can relate to Jesus right? *This* is the wonderful miracle and grace of the incarnation: The Son of the Most High laid down his majesty, was born somehow to a virgin moth in a dusty, remote town. When he started his public ministry, he spend time with people on the fringes of society: the crippled and lepers, the widows and children, the prostitutes and tax collectors, the sick and demon-possessed. Eventually he had a bunch of regular folks like you and me following him as his disciples. We'll see as the Gospel of Luke unfolds that God's "kingdom" in the Scriptures is not an earthly, human kingdom at all! It was a spiritual kingdom that would take care of a *greater* need than to free people from political and military slavery; God was going to free people from the slavery of sin and death, which we'll talk about next...

Transition: Now we've heard about God's presence and God's promised King. Now for the third main point let's...

III. See verses 35-37: God's Perfect Son.

- A. [Here's the third truth as we think about these verses...] **Truth #3:** Jesus is God's wonderful Son, born by the Holy Spirit and without sin (35-37).
 - 1. In these verses, the angel Gabriel declared that Jesus would be conceived by the supernatural doing of the Holy Spirit.
 - a) Gabriel the angel explained how this would happen in verse 35: Jesus would be conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. By the way, the Holy Spirit is called the "Most High" here- the third person of the Triune God who is "Most High." It's pretty cool that each person in the Trinity had significant roles in the events of Christmas; the God the Father sent God the Son to earth and God the Spirit executed that incarnation in the virgin birth. The phrases that he *will come upon you* and that he *will overshadow you* indicate that by the Holy Spirit's power, Mary would be pregnant with Jesus without Mary sleeping with anyone. While this is impossible in scientific terms, as Gabriel said later, "nothing will be impossible with God"- it is a miracle!

- b) I'd like to mention two reasons why this is so important. First, the virgin birth as described here made it possible for *both* the truths that Jesus was 100% God and 100% human in one person. God could've done it some other way: He could've sent Jesus without any human parents, but then it would be hard for us to see how he was *truly* human. He could've sent Jesus to be born with two parents and still keep all of his divine nature, but then it would be hard for us to see how he was *distinctly* God.
- c) Let me read what Wayne Grudem wrote about this:
- o "When we think of these two other possibilities, it helps us to understand how God, in his wisdom, ordained a combination of human and divine influence in the birth of Christ, so that his full humanity would be evident to us from the fact of his ordinary human birth from a human mother, and his full deity would be evident from the fact of his conception in Mary's womb by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit."

In other words, by Jesus being born by the power of the Holy Spirit, we see that he was the "Son of God"; by Jesus being born through a human mother, we see that he was also the "Son of Man."

- d) If you think about it, all births and the making of a human being are miraculous. This hit me with each pregnancy and kid that Nickey and I had (actually, Nickey did most of the work for this). The fact that a brand-new human being was growing in the womb of my wife always blew me away. How is this even *possible*? God creates an individual person out of the shared cells and DNA of his or her parents. And each individual person has their own distinct appearance, personality, talents, and passions that unfold over that person's life! This is *absolutely* a miracle! No human being can recreate this, no matter how brilliant our science and technology gets! All this is to say that then it is *also* very conceivable that God, whom the Bible says created the *entire universe* out of nothing, can create a child outside of the normal way that he designed!
- e) And this presents the second reason *why* the virgin birth is so important: it makes it possible that Jesus was 100% human- but without inherited sin! Gabriel said in verse 35, *Therefore the child to be born will be called holy- the Son of God.* The child that will be born from the Holy Spirit will be the second Adam- the only other human being born the same way as Adam, which was not by natural conception but directly from God's hand. Adam was literally the "son of God" this way; and Jesus also was literally the "Son of God" too! He did not have a human father and therefore did not inherit the sinful nature that is passed along to every human being after Adam.
- f) From verses 35-37 we see Wonderful Truth #3: Jesus is God's wonderful Son, born by the Holy Spirit and without sin. Jesus was born "holy" and without sin- and throughout his life he did not sin. The apostle Paul explains the significance of this:
- o Galatians 4:4-5 (NLT): *4 But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. 5 God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children.*

So Gabriel told Mary that this was the “right time” that God was sending his Son, as 100% God and without sin and as 100% man who was subject to the law and obeyed it perfectly. What this means, according to John Murray, is that Jesus took care of our guilt of sin on the cross, bearing the penalty on the cross, and Jesus also perfectly fulfilled the demands of righteousness, living in perfect obedience to the Law of God. And in doing this, he *bought freedom* for those who believe in him! We can also be *adopted* as children of God- also a miracle of God that is wonderful- it is surprise mingled with admiration that only God could author and that Christ could accomplish!

Transition: So far we’ve heard about God’s presence, God’s promised King, and God’s perfect Son. Now for the fourth main point let’s...

IV. See verse 38: God’s People Believe.

- A. [Here’s the fourth truth as we think about these verses...] **Truth #4:** Jesus is whom we serve with wonder-filled faith that God’s words are true (38).
1. In these verses, Mary announced that she was God’s servant, believing that what God had declared to her would come to pass.
 - a) Mary’s statement in verse 38 is a beautiful statement of faith and submission to God’s word. She believed that what God was telling her through this angel was true. That phrase “according to your word” indicates that she believed God at his word, period. Mary had to believe that: she would become pregnant; his name would be “Jesus” because he would save the world; “Jesus” would be the king forever; she would carry the Son of God in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is a lot to believe! And Mary was just a normal young woman and she heard all this crazy, wonderful news. And basically, Mary said to God, “I believe you.” If anything, Mary was a model of wonder-filled faith in God’s words to her.
 - b) But there are a couple of things that can really mess up a heart of wonder-filled faith. The first is *cynicism*. Paul Miller, in his book *A Praying Life*, talks about how Christians develop a “quiet cynicism” and “spiritual weariness” as our prayers seem to remain unanswered, we are disappointed with God, or when we fail to keep our commitments (which *always* inevitably happens). What happens is that our “hearts slowly shut down” because we don’t want to be let down or frustrated or feel guilty over and over again. Miller says this is why we don’t pray- remember that prayer is actually an exercise of our faith in God’s care, concern, and connection in our lives. What about for you? Has cynicism taken away your sense of wonder- that feeling of surprise mingled with admiration, caused by Christmas being beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar, or unexplainable?
 - c) The second thing that can really mess up a heart of wonder-filled faith is *familiarity*. You know, it’s when you have seen or experienced something so often that you start taking it for granted- that’s familiarity. Let me share an example: I grew up in Chicago- a *beautiful* city with some of the greatest architecture in the world. But my parents owned a grocery store in city and when I was a teenager I went to work at their grocery store once or twice a week- a one-hour round-trip drive. So after years of working there, I got *familiar* with the city- I even *disliked* driving into the city most of those times!

- d) But I haven't lived in the Chicago area for over twenty years and actually this past summer my family did this "architectural tour of Chicago" on a boat through the Chicago River. And I was just in awe and wonder at the beauty of the buildings and the history behind them. It was really eye-opening! Looking back, I really *took for granted* the beauty of the city and all that it had to offer for so many years because I got so familiar with it. What about for you? Has the familiarity of Christmas- the services, the traditions, the marketing- taken away your sense of wonder- that feeling of surprise mingled with admiration, caused by Christmas being beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar, or unexplainable?
- e) I'll tell you what wonder-filled faith is. Wonder-filled faith is focusing on Jesus and believing that what God's Word says about him is true: He is God's wonderful Son, born by the Holy Spirit and without sin, so he lived the life that we failed to live of perfect obedience to God and died the death that we should have died as the sacrifice for our sins! He is God's wonderful King that he promised to us in the Scriptures, whose Kingdom will be forever and includes all of those who believe in him! He is God's wonderful presence with us, his grace given to us as a gift, so we enjoy real, intimate fellowship and friendship with God- not having to *earn* God's favor but *given* God's favor as an eternal gift!
- f) I wish I could say there was a quick solutions to immunize us from cynicism and familiarity. But there's not. However, this is truth and we have to keep repeating it into our hearts: Faith is not based on feelings- it's not based on whether or not you feel "warm and fuzzy" this month in Christmas! It's based on the *object* of your faith...and the good news is that God and his words are reliable and true! This is the forever constant as you go through the ups and downs of life- and I know that many of us might be in a "down" season right now! From verse 38 we see Wonderful Truth #4: Jesus is whom we serve with wonder-filled faith that God's words are true. Therefore, holidays like Christmas are a "means of grace": This is an opportunity for us to look back at what God has given us this Christmas season- his Son as our Savior, our King, and his presence with us! This is an opportunity for us to be reminded that God's past activities and promises helps us to trust God in our uncertain present and future situations.

Transition: We heard about God's presence, God's promised King, God's perfect Son, and finally how God's people believe. Now let's conclude with the...

Conclusion

V. Life Application

- A. Thinking about Luke 1:26-38, how can you have wonder-filled faith in God's news of Jesus' birth this Advent season?
1. First, set aside time in solitude to personally reflect on the Christmas story from the Bible.
 - a) As a "means of grace," think about some time that you can allocate this week to be in the Word this week and be with Jesus: God's presence, God's promised King, God's perfect Son, and how you believe in him. This is helpful because there is a lot of busyness and noise in our lives, isn't there?

- b) Pausing this way- intentionally planning specific times to do this- can be a great way to be filled with wonder at the *gift* God gave us in his Son! It's a good chance to evaluate the *cynicism* and *familiarity* levels in your heart and spend time in repentance and receiving God's grace again.
2. Second, set aside time in church community to remember the significance of Christmas.
- a) Be intentional for this too: doing something in LIFE group, making plans to meet together, or connecting in any other way you can with brothers and sisters in Christ! Read an Advent devotional together. Sing Christmas hymns together. Share with each other stories in your own lives about when God's grace was so real and clear to you- when it was *wonderful*.
 - b) Don't underestimate these corporate means of grace. Even something like attending Baptism Service is a chance to see the gospel- the wonderful news of Jesus' salvation- in each other.

Transition: In fact, we can do this now, can't we? Let's identify what is causing some of our *cynicism* and *familiarity* in our hearts. Let's meditate on the wonderful news of Jesus' birth: God's presence with us, God's promised King throughout the Scriptures, God's perfect Son born holy to be the sacrifice for our sins. Let's ask God to *give us* renewed, wonder-filled faith, especially in the current situations that we are in. Let's do this now together!

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