

## Advent 4: Awe-Struck Anticipation

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### Luke 1: 26-38

In the beginning of our Advent sermon series, we explored how Jesus came as the fulfilment of so many Old Testament promises. Prophets like Daniel and Isaiah had foretold the coming of the Son of Man and Son of God, the true heir of David's throne, who would establish an everlasting Kingdom. With that in mind, look at how the Angel Gabriel announces Jesus to Mary:

*"You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"*

Gabriel proclaims Jesus as the long-promised King, the answer to Israel's prayers and hundreds of years of waiting. This joyful news is somehow also revealed to Elizabeth, who greets Mary with these words:

*"God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. Why am I so honoured, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy."*

In the commercialism and social whirl of our contemporary Christmas, it is easy to lose sight of the reason why we're celebrating. If you listen or read the news, you'd think that Christmas was only about shopping for great presents, eating wonderful food and partying. The reason for the celebration is often lost. At the heart of our nativity story though, is a reason for great joy and celebration – God has fulfilled his promises to his people! Jesus, the long expected Messiah, has been born to us. The waiting is over and the party should rightly begin.

At the same time, we have spoken during Advent about how Jesus' Kingdom was upside-down compared to what people expected. The wise men expected Jesus to be born in Herod's palace – where else would a new King of the Jews be born, but they eventually found him in a humble backstreet home. Jesus' first guests weren't the rich or powerful, but lowly shepherds. This humble, upside-down birth set the tone for his ministry – Jesus criticised the so-called 'important' people and lifted up the sick, the marginalised and the outcasts. He didn't pander to nationalistic hopes, he didn't conquer by force or might. For many people, the ministry of Jesus was a challenge to their narrow picture of God and his purposes in the world. Remember last week our reading from

Matthew 11 where John, locked up in prison, sends his disciples to Jesus to ask: *'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'* Even John, the one born to point people to Jesus, didn't fully understand Jesus' ministry.

We still have similar problems today. Many proud, powerful and rich people would like God to be made in their image, for him to champion their social group, prop up their political project or defend their financial security. Remember that photo of Donald Trump outside St John's Church, Washington, the so-called Church of the Presidents, holding aloft a Bible? Accompanied by a small group of aides and the media - protesters, priests and families having been cleared away by national guardsmen and federal officers - the President of the United States, arguably the most powerful man in the world, presented himself as a man with God on his side. But God cannot be co-opted into plans such as that. God continues to favour the outcasts, the underdogs, the politically powerless and economically weak, ironically the very people that Trump cleared off the street for his photoshoot. Mary's song of liberation is as subversive towards the 'powers that be' today as it was 2000 years ago:

*"His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He has scattered the proud and haughty ones. He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands."*

How will we join with the God of the poor and the least this Christmas? In the middle of our celebrating – whatever that looks like for each of us this year – how can we favour the people that meant so much to Jesus? Is there a local charity you could support, a service you could give a couple of hours of volunteering to, a lonely person you could call, or an excluded person you could deliver a card or gift to? It's been lovely to support the Foodbank Christmas appeal, but are there other needs you are aware of and could meet?

We've also talked in this sermon series about the challenge of holding things in tension. We have wrestled with the suspense of being *'now'* part of the Kingdom of God, but that Kingdom *'not yet'* being here in its fullness. We have seen the dawn, but the party has not yet started. We have seen the seed, but not the harvest. Or in Covid-19 speak, the vaccine has arrived – it's in the *'here and now'*, but full immunity is a long way off, and the relaxing of restrictions a very definite *'not yet'*.

Perhaps the greatest tension at the heart of the Christian faith is summed up in the words of the Angel to Joseph as he quotes Isaiah 7:

*“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel (which means ‘God with us’).”*

Emmanuel. God, with us. Jesus is God, with us. He is the eternal Word of God, active in the creation of the world, holding all things together. He is the God that is holy, other, transcendent. We humans were separated from God by our selfish actions. The story of the Old Testament is that we cannot be ‘with God’. We are cut off, unholy, unable to reach God by our own efforts.

Yet Emmanuel, ‘God with us’, means that we are no longer alone. God chose to come and live right in the middle of our mess. I love verse 14 of John 1 from the Message translation as it cuts to the very heart of the incarnation:

*“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish.”*

The creator of the universe emptied himself to shrink to the size of a tiny, helpless baby. This tiny helpless baby is the God and ruler of the whole world. Remember those words from Isaiah 9:6:

*“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
‘Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.’”*

Jesus coming to live among people 2000 years ago is a glimpse of what God will make complete when Jesus comes again. ‘God with us’ is the goal of history. Revelation promises that our hope is fixed on God dwelling with his people forever. We see that promise in Revelation 22: 3:

*“The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”*

This week, as our Christmas celebrations reach their height, let’s take a moment to gather again around the manger. Let’s see, gurgling among the hay, everything that humanity has waited for. In this fragile child we see humanity’s weaknesses, and God’s strength. We see a broken world and a hope of a world renewed. We see the injustice of human structures, and the promise of all things put right. We see God, with us. God who is with us in our waiting, and will one day bring all waiting to glorious resolution.