

Unlikely Messenger Boys

The Myths, Messengers and Mystery of Christmas – Part II

Selected Scripture

Introduction

A couple of times in the past year, I have driven by homes in my neighborhood that had pink or blue balloons attached to the mailbox. One yard, in fact, was covered with stork figurines bearing the announcement, “It’s a girl!” It is one more way that a couple can make the announcement to the world that their baby has been born.

When I drive by these homes, I am filled with a sense of both joy and concern for the couples. I try to imagine how they are doing – especially if it is their firstborn. They are having sleepless nights, upside-down schedules, a sink filled with formula cups and bottles, damp pajamas and towels, and a laundry basket overflowing with crib sheets. And that smell! Do you know that smell? It is a combination of baby lotion, baby powder, antiseptic, and dirty diapers all rolled into one. It permeates the house and even follows you to work!

This new life and lifestyle is what I call, “the blur”. There is “the blur” of those first days and weeks . . .

It never fails, however, especially if you are going through it and are exhausted and bleary eyed, that you are bound to meet another new mom who is bright eyed, filled with energy, and who announces to you, “Oh, it’s so wonderful, isn’t it? From the first night we came home from the hospital, our baby has slept through the night – and then takes a four hour nap during the day.”

Aren’t babies great?!

You just want to shoot her. In Christian love, of course!

In most homes, the birth of a baby signals more than an announcement of birth – it signals a change of life. Putting a stork in the yard is the easy part. Life will never be the same.

Multiply that by at least a billion, and you have the birth of Christ. Talk about a change of life for Mary and Joseph; talk about turning life upside-down!

There are even announcements of Christ’s birth – not blue balloons, but a parade of angels; not storks in the yard, but shepherds in the barnyard, who are amazed at the sight of the Savior. There is a flurry of activity as the Father makes the announcement to the world.

We learned in our last discussion, the celestial glory of God burst forth one thousand miles away to a group of eastern scientists and philosophers. They are, even now I believe, hurriedly packing for the journey.

The angels have filled the sky over Bethlehem and are making their announcement as well. Even the angel Gabriel has made several personal appearances announcing the news.

What makes these announcements so remarkable, is that for four hundred years the skies have been silent. There has been no message from God at all. Neither stars nor angels nor prophets have declared any message from God. When Malachi put down his pen, God went silent.

Now however, after some four hundred years, the silence is shattered by these announcements from God. What a grand sound it was as God used everyone from shepherds to angels.

Messengers of Christ’s Birth

There happen to be two messengers of God that are often overlooked in the Christmas story, when everything was a blur. I will tell you ahead of time – one messenger was a baby boy who had not yet even been born; the other messenger was an old man who was about to die.

I would like to take you to two different scenes where God made His announcement of Christ’s birth. Turn in your Bible to the gospel by Luke, chapter 1.

John the Baptizer

The angel Gabriel has made his first appearance, announcing the miraculous conception and soon coming birth of a baby boy. But this boy’s name is not Jesus, it is John. The father’s name is Zacharias and the mother’s name is Elizabeth. Even though

they are well beyond childbearing age, Elizabeth conceives a son.

According to Gabriel, the baby boy is to fulfill the prophecy of Malachi and prepare the way for the Messiah. The four hundred years of silence are over.

Elizabeth is going to have a son, named John. We know him by his prophetic distinctive, and we call him, John the baptizer.

When Elizabeth is six months pregnant, the angel Gabriel comes again – this time to Mary. She is given similar news – she is about to become pregnant. That, however, is where the similarity stops.

Mary, a virgin, will conceive by the overshadowing miraculous Holy Spirit. There is no doubt she is filled with questions. Joseph will be too!

Before Gabriel leaves Mary, he leaves a tremendous encouragement with her. Notice verse 37.

For nothing will be impossible with God.

Why does he add that? Because Mary will hear it once and she will hear it a thousand times – “That’s impossible!”

- “No man is involved in this pregnancy? That’s impossible!”
- “God caused this to happen? That’s impossible!”
- “You’re carrying the Messiah? That’s impossible!”

Mary would be able to say, “That’s just what the angel knew you’d say – it is impossible, but nothing is impossible with God!”

Where does Mary turn? Where does she go for understanding? Where can she run for advice and counsel and help?

Did not Gabriel hint at the answer in the prior verse, verse 36?

And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month.

Another miracle baby is on the way. Another impossibility is coming to pass. Like Sarah of old, Elizabeth and Zacharias are expecting their firstborn son.

We do not know if Mary told her parents; we do not know how much she told Joseph. The text informs us that she took off on a three day journey to

see her relatives who were also about to have their lives changed forever.

Now notice this incredible encounter in verses 39 and 40.

Now at this time Mary arose and went with haste to the hill country, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth.

Watch this carefully, in verse 41.

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Look at verse 44, Elizabeth says,

For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy.

This is not just some prenatal kick or a lap in the pool; this was literally an upward leap. This is the same Greek word for the skipping and leaping of sheep in a field.

Why would Elizabeth’s baby boy bump his head on his mother’s ribs?

To begin with, it is because the Holy Spirit has induced him to do so, having already prepared him to be the announcer of the Messiah. This baby is an Old Testament prophet and Old Testament prophets had a special anointing of the Holy Spirit at times, as they carried out their prophetic ministry. And Gabriel’s message to Zacharias clearly stated, as verse 15 tells us, that John would be under the influence of or,

. . . filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother’s womb.

This leap was John’s first prophetic expression. This was his first prophecy concerning the Messiah who had been conceived less than three days earlier.

As amazing as it sounds, the baby prophet is delivering from the uterus, his first prophetic utterance! He is only nine inches long and weighs less than two pounds and he is overcome with joy.

What does this say about the life of the unborn in the womb? I will tell you – it is human life. It is *life!*

John, at six months:

- was able to experience emotion;
- responded with Spirit induced worship;
- was able to hear the sound of Mary’s voice;
- reacted physically to his Messiah’s presence;

- surged upward with the sentiment of adoration.

John did a dance of joy in the darkness of his mother's womb.

“That's impossible!”

Remember, nothing is impossible with God.

What an incredible encounter this was between these two women. Think of all they had in common in this uncommon scene.

- They were both miraculously expecting.
- They were both experiencing a pregnancy that only God could have arranged.
- They would both have sons who had been announced by the prophet Gabriel.
- They would both have sons who would fulfill prophecies of old.ⁱ

Luke informs us, in verse 56, that Mary stayed with Elizabeth and Zacharias for three months, and then returned home to her parents and to Joseph. By now, Joseph had been visited in a dream by an angel, who was most likely Gabriel, and told that Mary was indeed pregnant by the hand of God.

Simeon

If I could fast forward the tape past the birth of Christ, I would like to show another messenger of God. This messenger is not a unborn boy who has yet to live outside his mother's womb; this one is an old man who probably will not live much longer.

Before we look at that brief encounter, notice the setting in Luke, chapter 2, verse 22.

And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord.

Ha – imagine – they are taking Jesus to ceremonially present Him before the Lord. God the Father and God the Spirit observe the presentation of God the Son, in the flesh. God, being presented to God.

Joseph and Mary are fulfilling the prescription of the law. God, through Moses, as recorded in Leviticus, commanded that the woman was to be purified by the offering of sacrifices.

After the birth of a son, the mother would not be in attendance at the sanctuary for forty days. After this, offerings were made and she was returned to full communion with the assembly of worshipers.

Mary was not a sinless saint; she was not above the law of Moses. She, like every human being, was responsible to commune with God through the guidelines and channels God had arranged. According to the law, she was unclean until after these sacrifices were made on her behalf.

And since Mary and Joseph were close enough to Jerusalem, they traveled the six miles to personally give the offerings. Luke tells us, in verse 24b, that Mary and Joseph brought,

. . . a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.

If we had time to look at this guilt offering, offered on behalf of the mother, you would discover that Moses actually called for a lamb to be brought. Leviticus, chapter 12, outlines the laws of motherhood and defines this offering.

However, Moses made an allowance for poor women who could not afford to bring a one year old lamb. They could instead, bring either turtledoves or pigeons.

This was actually referred to as the Offering of the Poor.ⁱⁱ

The wise men had not arrived yet – their gifts of gold would have allowed Mary to buy the finest one year old lamb money could buy. And she would have too!

However, Mary and Joseph are poverty stricken. How do we know? In this verse, they brought birds instead of a lamb. They did not have money for a lamb!

Do you see it?! They had indeed brought a lamb! *The Lamb of God.* There they are, presenting their sacrificial animals in the temple, while at the same time, holding their baby who would become the final sacrifice.

There was someone who knew it all.

Before Joseph and Mary made it to the priests, they were interrupted by an old man. Notice verses 25 through 28, of Luke, chapter 2.

And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel [the Messiah]; and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ [the Messiah].

And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law,

then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said, “Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, according to Your word;

“for my eyes have seen Your salvation,

“which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

“a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.”

Can you imagine this scene? Mary and Joseph are interrupted suddenly by an old man who was not even a priest. Simeon was just a godly man who had been given the privilege to be one of God’s messengers. He was giving the announcement that the baby was born; that, “The Messiah is here!”

Application – Four Observations

Let me wrap up our study with four observations.

1. First, the fact that God had been silent for four hundred years, did not mean He had stopped working.

Silence and sovereignty are a combination none of us like. Take heart and hope during dark days of silence – God is still at work.

2. Secondly, the message from God tends to be heard by those who want to listen.

Think about this – we have no record of priests gathering around Simeon to ask questions and to prod Joseph and Mary for information. No crowd formed, anxious to have a chance to hold Him too; demanding more information about the implications of Simeon’s prayer.

They are all busy about the temple. They are taking little notice of the introduction of this One whom every aspect of temple life portrayed. He was:

- the bread of the showbread table;
- the candelabra of everlasting light;
- the incense of pleasing aroma before the Father;
- the blood of the lamb upon the mercy seat;
- the sacrificial animal on the altar;
- the veil which would soon be torn away;
- the High Priest who would one day sit down.

Why did they not hear Simeon then? For the same reason perhaps, that you do not hear me now. You do not want to hold Him either; you do not want the Savior in your life.

3. The third observation is that when God chooses to act, He most often uses ordinary circumstances and ordinary people to accomplish His will.

God used a poor carpenter and his young poor bride. He used an aged priest and his elderly wife. And now, He uses an old man who is not even a priest, to hold Christ aloft and declare a message about this Messiah.

4. Lastly, even in the blur of life’s activities, God’s voice can be heard; His hand can be seen.

ⁱ Kent Hughes, The Gift (Crossway Books, 1994), p. 22.

ⁱⁱ William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 24.