

Luke 1:26–38 (CEB)

²⁶When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" ²⁹She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. ³¹Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. ³³He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom."

³⁴Then Mary said to the angel, "How will this happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?"

³⁵The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God's Son. ³⁶Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled 'unable to conceive' is now six months pregnant. ³⁷Nothing is impossible for God."

³⁸Then Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Revelation 21:1–7 (CEB)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. ⁵Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look! I'm making all things new." He also said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶Then he said to me, "All is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will freely give water from the life-giving spring. ⁷Those who emerge victorious will inherit these things. I will be their God, and they will be my sons and daughters.

Christmas is fast upon us.

Let us be among those who grasp the larger truth of the incarnation.

Far too many Christians fail to comprehend the true meaning of Christmas. *Jesus came to save us from our sins . . . Jesus came to show us the better way to live . . . Jesus came to share in our sufferings . . .* there is truth in all those, but all are incomplete. Christmas is all of them and more. At Christmas, we remember and we celebrate that God stepped into space and time in a way God never had before and has not since.

Nearly four millennia ago God launched a rescue project through a man named Abraham and his wife, Sarah. The goal was to rescue humanity by restoring us to a right relationship with God *and* to rescue God's good creation from the wreckage of human sin. And two millennia ago, God brought that project to its conclusion, ushering in God's kingdom and offering rescue, through Jesus' faithfulness, to all those who would trust God's son with their lives and their future.

Thus today, we try to keep the whole project in mind and reflect not only on the birth of the Christ-child but also on the final consummation of God's rescue project, the

restoration and renewal of all that is, so gloriously depicted in the closing chapters of Revelation and, hence, the Bible.

The announcement that God's time to act has arrived

When Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel, she was engaged to a young man named Joseph. Gabriel begins by telling Mary that she is favored by God. 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. 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. The word "overshadow" or "come over you" (v. 35) translates the Greek, *episkiazo*, and carries the sense of God's holy presence, as in the cloud that "covered" the tabernacle (Exodus 40:35). There is no sexual nuance here at all.

Gabriel then tells Mary that her relative, Elizabeth, is pregnant, even though Elizabeth was very old and had been unable to bear children (see Luke 1 for that story). 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.

The Name of Our Salvation

Though we often take names for granted, in the Bible names are very important. Biblical names were readily understandable and were often translatable sentences. Mary is told that her baby's name is to be Jesus. "Jesus" is simply the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Yeshua/Joshua, meaning "Yahweh [God's name] is salvation." Matthew tells us that the baby is to bear this name because "he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

Thus, even when we say the name, "Jesus," we proclaim God's salvation, a rescue not only of humanity but all of God's creation. We need only embrace the truth of Jesus' resurrection to grasp that Jesus truly ushered in the kingdom of God. Yet, like his disciples long ago, we know we live in a world marked too often by sin, tragedy, and death. What gives, we ask? Another Christmas will come and go and there is still so much wrong with this world. How can we truly make sense of Revelation 21 and 22? Don't they tell us that the kingdom of God is only a future hope? In a word . . . no. The truth revealed across the New Testament writings is that God's future has come already . . . and not yet. There is mystery here, but we can make some sense of it.

Grasping the truth of the already/not yet

Jesus came talking about the fulfillment of the Jewish hope and demonstrating the reality of God's kingdom. He said the kingdom of God was at hand (Mark 1:15) and in God's kingdom there were to be no blind or lame, so Jesus made the blind see and the lame walk. It is true that after Jesus' crucifixion most Jews saw him only as a failure who ushered in nothing more than disappointment. But some did see the truth of the resurrection and joined the small band of believers.

Yet, in the years immediately after Jesus' resurrection, these first followers of Jesus, all of whom were Jewish, had a problem. They proclaimed to all who would listen that Jesus truly was the long-expected Messiah, but it was also clear that evil and tragedy and suffering were still present in the world. It's as if the Messiah had come, but the Kingdom of God had not! That was not God's promise and, thus, to the typical Jew, the

answer was simple – Jesus wasn't really the Messiah, hence the world still awaited the coming of the Kingdom of God.

But some of Jesus' disciples had seen, touched, and eaten with the risen Christ. They knew that God's anointed had indeed come. "Crucified Messiah" was no longer an oxymoron; it was the truth. Thus, the problem was not with Jesus but with the Jewish expectations.

Yes, Jesus was the Messiah. The resurrection of Jesus could only mean that God's kingdom had come – but it had not yet come into all its fullness. That would await Jesus' return. The time of renewal had begun with the Messiah's coming but the consummation of this transformation would await his return. The Christians came to understand that they lived "between times" when God's kingdom had come *already*, and *not yet*. I really can't overemphasize how important to our reading of the New Testament is our understanding of this "already/not yet" perspective. When Paul writes that Christians are the ones on whom the "ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor 10:11), he means exactly that. This framework determined everything about the early Christians – how they lived, how they thought, what they wrote, how they worshipped . . . everything. The new order had begun. They were new creations (2 Cor 5:17). They were now the people of the Spirit. . . . and, truly, so are we!

Images of a world put right

In his closing chapters, the writer of Revelation shares with us his glorious visions of this new creation, this reconciled home, and of our eternity with God. It is like reading a stained glass window. In it, each fragment of glass is borrowed from earlier in the story that began with Genesis. The "new heaven and new earth" is from Isaiah 65 and 66. The loud voices from the throne sing from Ezekiel, as well as Isaiah 35 and 65. The water of life evokes for us the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well to whom he promises "a spring of water that gushes up to eternal life" (John 4). There is the tree of life, which we have not seen since Genesis 3 when the humans were exiled from the Garden of Eden, denying them access to this tree that gives eternal life. Whereas Moses couldn't see God's face and live (Exodus 33:20), we are told that God's servants will see God's face (Rev. 22:4).

For the sake of the whole world

It is so easy to be caught up in the troubles and terrors of our lives and our world, even at Christmas time. Too often, we are overwhelmed by our anxieties and fears. Yet, Revelation's apocalyptic visions of a day with no death or tears or pain are God's promises that all will be well. The closing visions of Revelation are one big fountain of joy. We may not always know that all will be well, but God knows it.

As Gordon Fee writes, we are empowered by God's Spirit to live the life of the future, of God's kingdom, in the present age. We are to be, in Paul's phrase, "ambassadors for Christ," carrying God's message of reconciliation and hope to the world, in what we do and say every day. We are new creations not just for our own sakes but for the sake of all the world. Paul understood that in his journeys he was crisscrossing the Mediterranean founding colonies of a new human race, a people born from above, born of the Spirit (John 3). St. Andrew is just such a colony. It can be hard for us to think of ourselves this way . . . but that is the nature of transformation. It may take the butterfly awhile to comprehend its own rebirth. We may not always feel like new creations. We certainly don't always act like new creations. But we are. *This is the real world. This is our reconciled home. This will be our final home and God's with us.*

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Because we live "between the times" our task is to build for the kingdom of God. In what ways are you doing so this Christmas? How are you helping to build a world, a community, a home of joy and peace? There is a lot of division among us this year (that red/blue thing); in what ways can we be peacemakers and bridge-builders this

Christmas – even in our own families. That might sound impossible, but nothing is impossible for God!

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, 2 Samuel 7:4-17 God makes a promise to David about David's name and throne.

Tuesday, Matthew 1:18-25 Matthew's telling of Jesus' birth

Wednesday, Mark 1:15 Mark begins his good news about Jesus

Thursday, Luke 10:1-12 When Jesus sends out disciples to heal, notice what he tells them to say (verse 9). The kingdom of God arrived in Jesus – already!

Friday, Luke 17:20-37 Jesus warns against being one of those who fail to see that the kingdom of God is *already* among us.

Saturday, Revelation 1:22-2:5 More of the poetic images from Revelation conveying the wonder of the new heaven and new earth – the final consummation of God's kingdom.

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Genesis

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall – We will not meet on Dec 26.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the Gospel of Luke

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall – We will not meet on Dec 27.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The Current Series: *Our Family Tree*

The story of Christianity and its denominations

This class will not meet on Dec 25 and Jan 1.